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PC gaming's best of 2003



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PC PowerPlay



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REVIEWED!

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REGULARS

08 Inbox

Your words of wisdom

10 Insight

Industry news and analysis

18 Hotware

Cool and crazy gadgets

20 Out to Play

By Timothy C. Best

22 The Guerilla Gamer

By Anonymous

24 Tech Talk

By Stuart Calvin

28 Games in Preview

What's coming soon?

83 Decrypt

Jargon unjargonised

84 The Beast

The ultimate gaming PC

86 Setup

Troubleshooting tips

88 The Hub

Online gaming news

96 Disc Guide

What's on the discs?

97 Next Month

A subtle reminder

98 Yellow Boots

Our roving reporter

GAMES IN REVIEW

54

The latest titles we've installed

55 Deus Ex: Invisible War

58 Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon

60 Beyond Good & Evil

62 Storm Angel

63 Cricket 2004

64 UFO Aftermath

65 Horizons



TECH IN REVIEW

66

The silicon state of the art

74 Medion Titanium MD 8080 XL

75 GeForce FX 5950 shootout

76 Silent Solution kit

VGA Silencer

78 TDK TS 150R Tremor spkrs

MSI DR8 DVD burner

80 U-Storage Mega Memory watch

Creative NOMAD MuVo 1.5GB

67 Powertest

Control Freak

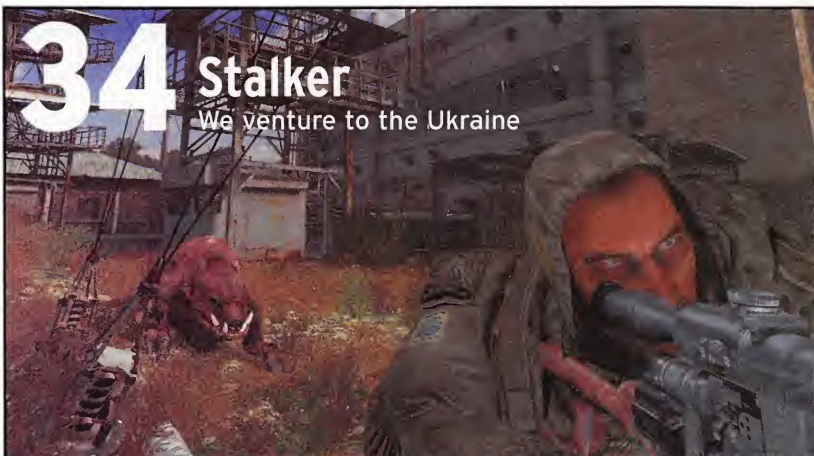


SUBSCRIBE

26

26 Subscribe and save!

Get the 13 issue DVD edition and you could win a PCPP t-shirt for free!



34 Stalker

We venture to the Ukraine



40 2003 in Review

The PCPP Awards night



46 The PC of 2004

This year's hot hardware



56 Deus Ex Invisible War

Conspiracy-tastic!

"Crytek has produced what looks like a next-generation blockbuster at its first attempt" - *The Australian*

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As your Game of the Year votes flood the Redfern post office mailroom, spilling out onto the streets and providing a nice comfy bed for the homeless, we felt you might be interested in reading what we thought were the highlights of the past twelve months. To this end,

Editorial Who got the gong?

we've launched the inaugural PCPP Awards where the staff and contributors decide who gets the gongs and the readers can flame our choices on the forums. And of course, you'll get your ultimate revenge next issue when the GOTY winners are announced.

So as to avoid confusion with the GOTY system, we established five new categories, plus the obligatory Best Game Overall. Of the five, there are two awards for games that seek to extend the possibilities of the medium - Technical Achievement for the tech side and Gameplay Innovation for, well, the gameplay side. Neither award necessarily recognises the absolute best games, but rather attempts to highlight the bold and the brave. After all, 'tis better to reach for the stars and fail than make do with mediocrity.

Elsewhere, there are two industry type awards - for the publisher and developer who have given us the most gaming goodness throughout the year. For the Best Publisher category, we

looked for the one company who had served up the most consistent range of quality titles. In the end, it was a straightforward decision. It was more difficult determining the Best Developer since few studios release more than one game a year - if that, in many cases. However, again, our final choice was unanimous and we're confident you'll concur.

And finally there's a Hardware category too, dedicated to the specific component that has had the most impact on how we now play our games. 2003 was actually something of a quiet year in terms of groundbreaking hardware - hopefully we'll see more of that this year (check our PC of 2004 feature from page 46).

And, as an added bonus, we've rounded up the PCPP crew for everyone's personal top five games of the year. Who won what, you say? Well, turn to page 40 to find out...

Now, back to the after-show party...

David Wildgoose,
Editor
davidw@next.com.au

The ones to blame:



David Wildgoose
EDITOR

"Doing an issue in 2 weeks? Never again."

Playing: CM 03/04 4.1.4



Prumpy
THE DWARF

"Do you like my pink flowers?"

Playing: Statues. Still.



Daniel Wilks
SENIOR WRITER

"My time here is nearly done."

Playing: Call of Duty



Bennett Ring
DEPUTY EDITOR

"Can't... Talk... Must... Shoot... Migs."

Playing: LO:MAC



Ruth Barbato
ART DIRECTOR

"I promise I'll never eat Indian again."

Playing: Keeping it Down



Timothy C. Best
SENIOR WRITER

"I'll miss Valentine's Day, and that may cost me my life"

Playing: Lords of EverQuest



Amos Hong
DISC EDITOR

"Kurt was good. But he's no Guy."

Playing: Smackdown!



Joel Graham
ADVERTISING MANAGER

"What the hell am I looking at?"

Playing: HALO. Loudly.



Anthony Fordham
SENIOR WRITER

"I'm ready for a slice of Post-Soviet entourage"

Playing: Deus Ex: Invisible War

PCPowerPlay

**78 Renwick St
Redfern NSW 2016**

PHONE 02 9699 0333
FAX 02 9699 0334

EDITORIAL

EDITOR

David Wildgoose
<davidw@next.com.au>

DEPUTY EDITOR

Bennett Ring
<bennetr@next.com.au>

ART DIRECTOR

Ruth Barbato
<ruthb@next.com.au>

DISC EDITOR

Amos Hong
<cdgod@next.com.au>

SENIOR WRITERS

Timothy C. Best
Stuart Calvin
Anthony Fordham
Daniel Wilks

CONTRIBUTORS

George Soropos, Asher Moses,
Vanessa Morgan, James Bannan,
Des McNicholas, March Stepnik

PHOTOGRAPHY

The Man in Black

ADVERTISING

GROUP ADVERTISING

MANAGER - GAMING DIVISION

Joel Graham
<joelg@next.com.au>

MANAGEMENT

PUBLISHER

Phil Keir

ASSOCIATE PUBLISHER

Sue Ostler

FINANCE DIRECTOR

Theo Fatseas

OPERATIONS MANAGER

Melissa Doyle

PRODUCTION CO-ORDINATOR

Natalie Pedler

SUBSCRIPTIONS

SUBSCRIPTIONS

PHONE 1300 361 146
FAX 02 9699 0334
EMAIL subs@next.com.au
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WRITE TO THE INBOX AT:

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PC Powerplay
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Redfern
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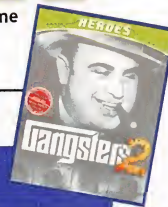
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INBOX

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HEROES

Atari is offering a free Heroes game to the author of every letter published in Inbox! This month's game is Gangsters 2!



DEVoured BY EA

What the **** has happened to all the good flight Sims? Janes was devoured by EA, Microprose has been taken over by Activision (*Really?* - Ed). My favourite has been the Apache sims but they seem to have been taken over by arcade games. Microsoft Flight Sims get a tad boring. Any news on flight sims?

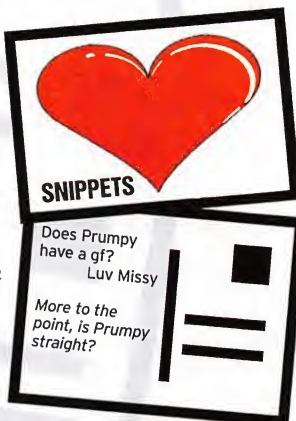
Gary McSweeney

I'll pass you over to PCPP's resident flight sim guru, Bennett... "Indeed, flight sims are getting rather thin on the ground. But thankfully there are two killer flight sims on the market that should satisfy your urges: IL2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles and Lock On: Modern Air Combat. Both of these will keep you happy for the next year or two."

A KNOWN ISSUE

LucasArts has added a "brilliant" mini game to Knights of the Old Republic, one that makes the game as tense as the Thief series. Let me paint the scene. The Jedi sneaks through the command ship towards the bridge knowing one wrong step will cause doom... throwing caution into the wind he and his compadres charge the sith troopers... but that will be there last move... for about 90 seconds as the screen goes black and stops receiving power, the sound skips and I let out another stream of curse words as I push the reset button. Oh yes this is a marvellous game. I have no clue when it will crash but it seems to be around every 2-10 minutes at random. Meaning I have to go all the way back to the last save, go through it again and eventually crash. I've emailed LucasArts, they say it must be a virus on my machine or my hardware is not good enough... Well, it's not a virus unless the nasty hackers have decided on world domination by creating a virus that only affects

LucasArts products. And my hardware performs fine with Max Payne 2, Commandos 3, Chrome and Call of Duty. About 30 of my friends have encountered this problem as well. Not only is it annoying and upsetting, it renders the game nearly unplayable.



How the hell did LucasArts a) miss it and b) release the game with a known issue... and surely they know of it by now so why the bloody hell don't they fix it. I'm on my 37th restart of the night (*Jesus!* - Ed) and I swear if it happens again I'm gonna burn it back to the dark and over-crispy side.

Slywolf99

We admire your persistence. We didn't encounter any issues with our review copy, but we have heard reports of such problems. Hopefully Bioware is working on a fix for it right now.

PAINTING FREAKS

I have been a long term reader of your mag, a PC gamer since the 286 days and long time Warhammer 40,000 enthusiast and now feel compelled to write to you. I have just read your Fire Warrior review by the much respected Anthony Fordham. I cannot believe that you have judged this game the way you have after playing the game fully through, and in my opinion it should have been awarded

as a game of credit. System requirements are low and nearing the end of the game I have found it to be quite challenging and at times very enjoyable. A rating of twenty three percent is the harshest I've seen for a long while and I felt a bit extreme. Yes as Anthony pointed out there is a wealth of history and character to draw upon in the 40K universe and yes the graphics are dated and level design uninspiring (console ports!) but you must understand that Games Workshop releases are few and far between for us small band of miniature painting freaks. Fire Warrior is at the end of the day a fairly ordinary attempt at trying to capture the feeling and intensity of a particular universe, but hell with an average of five years between drinks (Chaos Gate) I really can't complain!

Rod Smith

You seem to be saying that THQ adopted the attitude that Warhammer fans will buy anything as long as it has the Games Workshop endorsement. We're inclined to agree.

HIDDEN COPY

After my trip to the book store the other day I was glad to find my hidden copy of PC PowerPlay under the motor bike mags. But there were a few problems. All of the pages were very weakly stuck together, this caused the mag to slowly fall apart. So far the Max Payne 2 and the Unreal Tournament 2004 pages have fallen out and are somewhere in my extremely overstacked room. Also the DVD case had broken. Some moron must have broken it while packing it in the boxes back in the book store storage. Anyway, I blamed the book store for all the damages and I would just like to say, keep up the good work. Your mags are great.

Sammy

Er, yeah, it's all that bloody book store's fault.

To ensure you receive your Atari Heroes game (or to save us from chasing you up!), please include your full name and postal address with every letter or email you send. Thanks!

ALLIED FUN PLEASURE

I would just like to say that personally I find Starcraft: Brood War to be the best game ever created in terms of sheer concentrative allied fun pleasure. Perhaps an upgrade to it (if possible) with new units maybe would make a great game!

Trobzy

How is it back in 1999, Trobzy?

WHAT A RUSH

Since I can remember I have been hooked on single player First Person Shooters. The latest being Ironstorm which I found to be one of the best I've played (sharp shooters are meant to get you first time but I won't answer to all the critics of that game in this letter). I started Unreal 2: The Awakening in October and got to level 3 when my bro in NZ told me he was playing Black Hawk Down over the web and that I should get (buy) a copy and join his team. It took me a while to be convinced to get a copy; I've still got Soldier Of Fortune 2 and Hitman 2 awaiting my install and Unreal 2 of course has to be finished. I finally got a copy of BHD; got ADSL installed and jumped in to a life changing experience. What a ride. First month negative performance scores, shoot at each corner, new maps each week, what a rush. No more bots with scripted AI, no more quick save/reload, no more linear paths to completing a level. I know that there have been critics of BHD and there's more than likely better multiplayer FPS games out there but as a freshman of multiplayer I'm hooked on it. As I said I started Unreal

2 in October; well I reopened it a week ago for 10 minutes before jumping on the web for another shot of adrenalin pumping kill or be killed action. Now all I need is to get my wife hooked on computer games and my children to sleep though the night and my life will be perfect.

Stephen Avery

Dare we suggest Battlefield?

SEARCH AND DESTROY

The internet has changed. No longer can we surf the net and feel safe in our homes. As we surf the net nowadays we are saturated with ads, popups, cookies, spyware and other assorted annoyances. It doesn't just stop at the internet. It now involves many programs we use now today. My Download Accelerator Plus program has now become an invasion of privacy instead of a "useful" tool. I have used DAP for about a year now and saw it slowly fall into the abyss of advertising. DAP isn't a download manager anymore. It's just an ad. I installed a wonderful program called "Spybot - Search and Destroy". After it had scanned my computer it had found 103 spyware programs running on my computer! WTF???? How did it come to this? I knew about privacy invasion and spyware on the net before but to this extent? Privacy must be something that is taken very lightly in cyberspace. 103 programs monitoring what I do and sending it god knows where. Microsoft doesn't really seem to care much either. That messenger program of theirs (not MSN) was once popping up on my computer every 5 mins with ads on it. Why make another evil program Microsoft? It's got to be about as useful as the evil Findfast

program they developed and is just helping in reducing our privacy. I now have two programs installed that are trying to protect me from ads, spyware and all that other BS. But what about Joe Blow who has barely any computer knowledge? How will he know how to protect himself? What will happen to the people who have no idea about spyware and privacy invasion on their PCs? I can see this problem only getting worse in the future as well. Will pretty much every program we use in the future have an ad banner up the top and a few spyware programs running with it? Will we have our webcams hijacked from us by companies wanting to know when we go and take a piss? I for one am not looking forward to this future.

Imnottellingyoumyname

Our quaint concepts of privacy were a major reason for the collapse of modern civilisation, at least according to Deus Ex: Invisible War. Get over it now before it's too late!

AMERICAN YOKELS

So, once again, two American kids play GTA: VC and then go down to their local interstate and start taking pot-shots at cars with a .22 rifle. Once again, games and gaming take the blame. After all, say the objectionists, games taught them how to aim, shoot and reload a rifle at a quickly moving object. Games are the root of all evil, and must be destroyed. Blah, blah, blah. Can anybody else see the problem here? It's all about control systems. In all games, a single button controls the shooting, and you move a mouse around a pad to aim. So, if you were to listen to these people, you would believe that I am fully trained in all forms of weaponry available to the US and Iraqi armies, since I enjoy playing Desert Combat. Never mind that I use every single one of them by clicking and holding a mouse button, aim by moving the mouse around a little pad and reload by pressing 'R', I still know how to use them - and I'm a potential threat to society. I've never even held a gun, for god's sake. This is what these people would have you believe. In the end, the conclusion is clear - games DON'T teach you how to use weapons. In the case of the two pot-shooting

American yokels, they've probably been raised in an atmosphere of gun culture. Their dad probably taught them how to aim, shoot and reload a rifle. Hell, he probably supplied them with rifles. So the fact remains that no matter how much gaming you do, you would still have no idea as to fire a real life gun. So I would say that it's not gaming's fault that these kids went out and shot at cars - it's their dad teaching them how to, it's how easily they could get guns.

Ugmotic

Are you listening, America?!



FSAA FRIPPERY

I recently purchased a shiny new Radeon 9800 Pro. Now whilst I'm sure some of you are grumbling about this let me explain something I discovered after installing the card and setting it up. The first thing is that I needed a new card. Not because my old one wasn't good enough, but because it was dead. So I decided to buy the best seeing as how I would like it to last me at least the next two years. Whilst running all the appropriate benchmarks (3DMark 2001, 3DMark03, Aquamark etc.) I was continually staring slack-jawed at the performance of the card watching the scores rise faster than the number of bugs in an EA game. Then a horrible thought hit me... These were just benchmarks... The card had no impact on my gaming performance whatsoever. My old card had been a Ti4600 and was achieving great frame rates all the time. Since I don't really care about FSAA frippery (who can notice that stuff in-game anyway?) I actually pretty much felt duped. Here was something I paid \$500 for and I hadn't noticed much difference except in some throw-away uber-geek benchmarks. Bugger. And

don't mention Half-Life 2 because quite frankly DX 8.1 cards with a decent speed will not be obsolete for some time even if you can't turn on all of the eye candy. So by all means support ATI, but don't buy a graphics card worth more than \$250. Ever.

Peter Kaye

You may reassess that statement once you've played Half-Life 2...

TRUSTY THOMPSON

For the last three weeks, I have been playing Activision's Call of Duty, and have found it to be one of the most profound and inspiring games I have ever played. Not only does this game let you manipulate your environment like any other WWII FPS, but there is also a deep storyline (albeit briefly told) that is intertwined for each of the three main campaigns, to ensure that you are captivated into the rich but hectic world of the WWII foot soldier.

But it's not just the mechanics of the game that stands out. There is real emotion to be felt. Much of this inspiration is conjured up from within by the rich musical score that is played in each of the missions. This is especially true in the two harder modes of play, as you feel extremely satisfied that you have completed these missions without using the quick save function too much. And I have also experienced some camaraderie with some of the characters. Particularly the small SAS group found in the British campaign, and to a lesser extent, the American campaign. Although any Russian squadmate appears to automatically end up being MG-42 cannon fodder, no matter what mission you are trying to complete. When I finished playing through the game for the third time (on the hardest setting), I found myself thinking back to all of the videos and documentaries that I have watched before, detailing the hardship and appalling tragedy that was WWII. I have indeed watched many of these, as I am an avid aviation and war history buff. So there was much historical experience to draw from. When the end of the credits rolled, which contains that

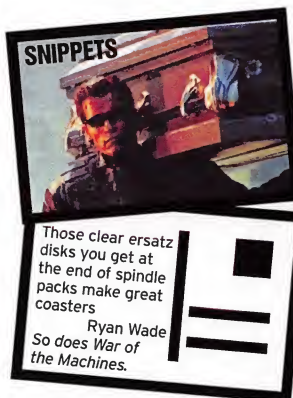
small movie of a lone American airborne trooper battling away against the dreaded Nazis - sometimes by himself, sometimes with a squad of buddies, tears started rolling as I felt an attachment and involvement with the events of both the game and from remembering events from my study of war history. I was proud to watch this little man, with his trusty Thompson SMG, make his way through each hardship, only to emerge from the other side all in one piece. The amazing musical score also encourages this emotional reaction. But this small moment highlights the level of captivation in the game, and the amazingly real gameplay. One can't help but get involved in the onscreen drama. I just wanted to say to Infinity Ward from me and others that they have done many a person a great credit with this game, as not only is it great fun to play with a definite replay value, but there is also an underlying message about WWII and the history lesson contained therein. Sometimes we need a game like this to retell the tale about the tragedy that was WWII. It provides some perspective.

Liam Linstid

And some people say it's just another shooter. The idiots.

WIDTH OF PAPER

Racing games lately are really starting to piss me off. They haven't fixed the most obvious problem since games became 3D - the crowd! The game can have the nicest



looking cars with perfect reflections and detailed paint jobs, but when you drive past a crowd that resembles a cardboard cut-out you don't care that you're driving a fantastically detailed car, you can only think about that pathetically lame attempt at a crowd you just hurtled past

at 200 km. This distraction however has led you to veer off to the side of the road, but using your lightning reflexes (developed from the endless hours of Quake III Arena) you somehow manage to avoid a collision with the side barrier. All this however cannot save you from being stopped by a street light, a twig, or an invisible wall all of which are only the width of paper! That's right your car, that was pulling face mashing g's has just been stopped by a piece of paper. Racing game developers take note make the racing environment destructible and FFS fix the crowd.

David Bradbury

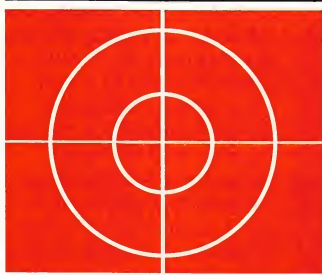
Try Midnight Club 2 then.

AS ONE MAN

I was reading PCPP #95 particularly the review of Empires: Dawn of the Modern World. A phrase stuck out at me in the review where it said "... the ability to jump into the middle of a cavalry charge or close-quarter battle..." My brain suddenly clicked and I got this idea of mixing a FPS with an RTS. Basically I was thinking of being able to play out battles on a grand scale or in first person or whenever you want to. Like being able to take control of one of the units and turn the battle in your favour as one man. Of course a lot of little details would have to be figured out but basically what if when you controlled a unit of your choice the computer AI takes over the RTS details like resources etc... However whilst in 1st person view you could maybe control other military units if you wished with a kind of mix of Medieval: Total War gameplay, of pause and command and maybe a map that showed all units whilst paused and command units to attack defend etc... like the Ghost Recon tactical map, but more detail. If all the minor details were worked out whilst in either modes then I think a game like this would be awesome, though maybe hardware consuming in the end.

Tom Hennessy

You mean, like Battlezone? Or Savage? It's hardly a well-established (or, perhaps, more importantly, commercially successful) genre mix, but there are a few such games around to search out.



Insight

MONKEY BUSINESS

VIA goes ape for consoles

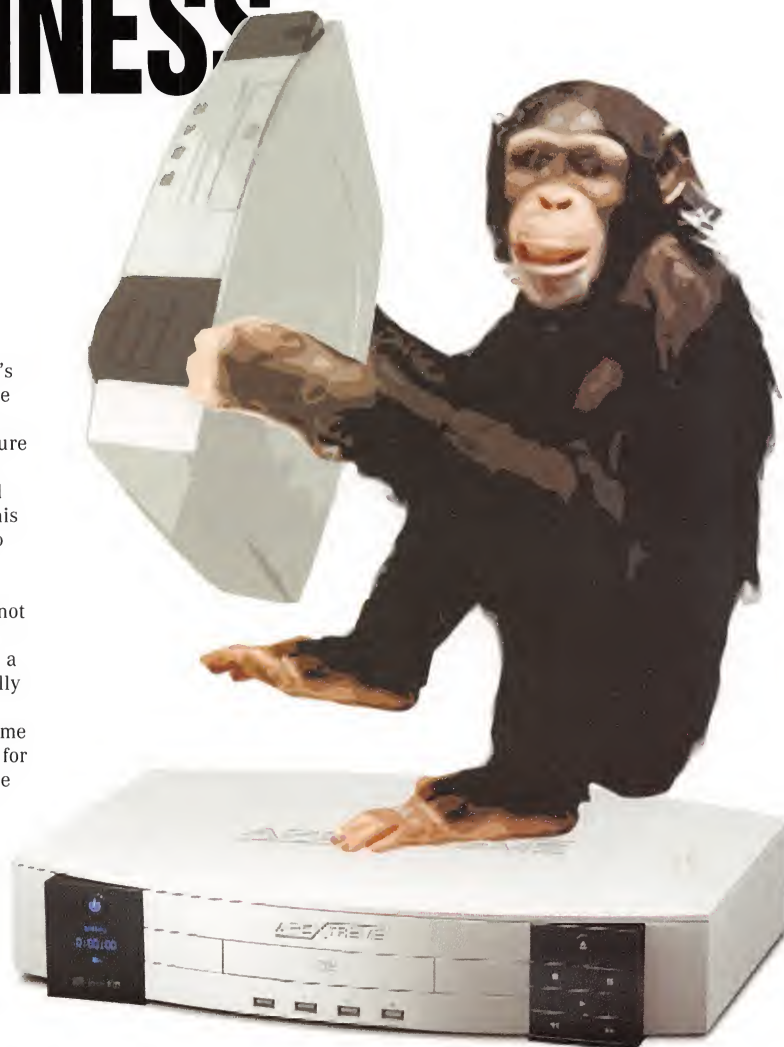
Bennett Ring

While many PC gamers sniggered at the "PC that's not a PC" otherwise known as the Xbox, there's no denying how successful this console architecture has proven with developers and gamers alike. Obviously VIA and ApeX Digital noticed how well this model worked, as they're soon to release their very own console-styled PC, known as the ApeXtreme. No, this name does not indicate that the only game available for the platform will be a melding of Donkey Kong with fully sick snowboarding.

Unlike the Xbox, the ApeXtreme will not use a proprietary format for games – simply slap any PC game into the drive and it will install automatically. Running Windows XP Embedded Edition, it won't present the user with the traditional Windows XP interface. As a result there will be no need to install new drivers manually, or to make changes to the Operating System, making this the perfect introduction to PC gaming for noobs. It's also going to be a hell of a lot cheaper than your standard PC, at somewhere between US\$299 and US\$399. Cripes, even us poor journos can afford it!

The guts of the unit are comprised of a 1.4GHz VIA C3 processor, VIA CM400 based motherboard and the new VIA DeltaChrome S8 GPU. Data storage will be taken care of by a 20GB hard drive, but it's not known what speed the 256MB of system memory will run at.

We're sure the ApeXtreme will excel at operating as a low powered Media box, allowing you to watch movies, play music and view images on your TV and Hi-Fi. The inclusion of a DVD drive, 1080p video output and six channel



surround sound will make this the perfect unit for these roles.

However, while these specs blow the Xbox, PS2 and Xbox out of the water, we're still very sceptical about how PC games will run on this box. All games will run at 1024 x 768 resolution, and from what we've seen of the DeltaChrome S8 graphics chipset and C3 processor, this machine just doesn't have anywhere near the grunt necessary to play PC games released since the late 1990s.

Console game developers have the benefit of knowing exactly what hardware their games are going to be run on, and as a result can extract much higher levels of performance out of their code. One

famous programmer once estimated that because of this effect, a console a third or lower than the speed of a PC is capable of running a game as well as the faster PC. Yet this is something that the ApeXtreme won't have the benefit of, as there won't be any ApeXtreme exclusive titles.

While we're willing to bet our Editor's left testicle that the ApeXtreme is going to be a dog of a games unit, we'll have to wait until March to see whether or not it's going to prove us wrong. But for the price, even if you're only using it to play movies, it's looking to be a very convenient and affordable solution for those interested in a media box.

Half-Life 2 Tools



As we went to print, Valve let slip that the benchmark tools for the Source engine were just about ready to be released. We'll include them on our coverdisc at the first available opportunity. Hopefully it's a sign that Half-Life 2 is nearing completion and will hit its anticipated April release date.

THEMIS MMOG REPORT

More Than Fun and Games

Timothy C. Best

The Themis Group has teamed up with another online research firm you haven't heard of and has released a comprehensive guide to the money side of massively multiplayer gaming.

The Themis Report plus the DFC Intelligence Online Game Market Report comes in at an impressive 521 pages and will set you back \$4800 (\$US3,595). Don't pull that face, the report also includes six months of updates.

It covers the key business side of the biz like how each of these games is set up to make money, what issues are likely to crop up in the coming years and who the major players are.

There are also detailed sections on the emerging Asian market, benefits of offering premium services, a breakdown of the console wars, as well as world-wide profit estimates for 2003, 2005 and 2008 (\$US960 million, \$US1.30 billion and \$US4.10 billion respectively).

Other highlights of the report include a list of the top five MMOG companies, which goes something like this: Korea's NC Soft, with Lineage, is the number one son, with Sony a solid second, then you have EA, Mythic and Microsoft rounding out the top five. All I can say about

that list is that it's amazing what The Sims can do you for your standing, and it's amazing how little we hear about games that don't concentrate on the U.S. market.

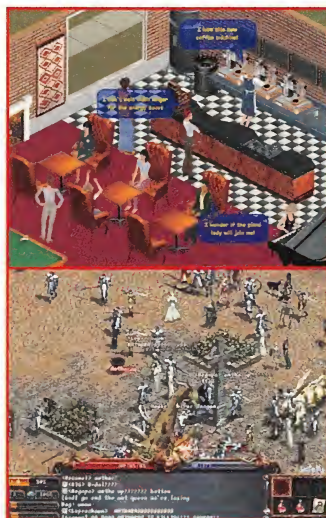
Another interesting list is the report's looking into the future for the top dogs for the year to come.

Blizzard's World of Warcraft is tipped to take the number one spot; followed by Sony's big sequel, EverQuest 2; Turbine's Middle Earth Online will be number three; a trip into Keanu's leathers is next with Matrix Online and just squeaking in under the bar is EA's Ultima sequel.

Themis is making some pretty safe bets there, but it's interesting that none of NC Soft's games have made it into the list, and you have to wonder if that's just it being patriotic. Don't forget, all of these can be yours for under \$5000. If you don't need the 500 page tome, you can also just buy Themis's report for a mere \$US995 or the DFC forecasts, company profiles and sales trends for \$US3000.

This might sound like a lot of money, but something like this is likely to be the best investment a fledgling studio could make.

When "Show me the money," is the first question that investors ask something like this makes for a



handy reference. When "what is wireless gaming" is the second question then something official-looking that you can flash up on a projector becomes a godsend.

Then there are the publishers. When it comes to dealing them, knowing who's doing what and having some independent idea of the money involved could level the playing field no end.

Great game ideas are one thing, but getting the dollars to make them, and then keeping them a reality is another. The information in something like these reports makes it all a little bit easier and while their mere presence shows that game business technology is evolving with the pixel shaders.

Egos Stroked



The new year saw Todd Hollenshead and Tim Willits gain co-ownership of id Software, joining John and Adrian Carmack and Kevin Cloud on the developer's management team. Right, enough self-congratulation guys, now how about finishing DOOM 3?

GTA Something



Rumours abound as to the title and setting of the 5th in the Grand Theft Auto series, due for release later this year. Some say GTA: Sin City, others are convinced it'll be GTA: San Andreas, while a crazy few even have it set in a future Tokyo. Personally, PCPP would like to see GTA: Redfern - the meanest streets of all!

Free Game



It's an oldie, but a goodie. Well, sort of. Rockstar has made DMA's quirky game of vehicular combat, Wild Metal Country, available for a free download. The catch is you have to sign-up for some mailing list to get it. Check www.rockstargames.com while you're signing up for the Max Payne 2 mod comp.

GRAND THEFT OUTRAGE

Your PC likes little boys

Daniel Wilks

According to a recent article in the New York Post Online Edition, the game GTA: Vice City is personally responsible for touching 10000 little boys in the bathing suit area and forever condemning them to a life of ridicule and shame. This may sound a little extreme but that's exactly what an impassioned plea for parents to dump Take 2 stocks has asserted, stating that the game is "10,000 times worse than the worst thing anybody thinks Michael Jackson ever did to a little boy", an argument that seems to revolve entirely around the fact that you play a drug dealer, can kill people (he takes special offence to the fact that there are Haitians singled out) and generally behave in an

antisocial manner. He goes on to explaining that the entire point of the game is "to get your drugs and your money back - by committing as many violent, homicidal crimes as you can possibly think up" and claims that "... when you do, everything will look incredibly and shockingly real, with blood spewing everywhere". I want to get my hands on his hyper-real version of the game because the one I have is a little too lurid and cartoony for my liking. The story becomes more convincing when the author, Christopher Byron wonders in print what would have happened if the Beltway Sniper had played GTA:



Vice City before committing his crimes - let me think - maybe he would have gone out and killed a bunch of people just like he was going to do anyway. On second thought maybe he would have become so addicted to the game that he forgot to get around to murder. I'm the first one to jump up and claim that a product will give you cancer or is responsible for history's greatest atrocities but come on, nothing is worse than Michael Jackson, apart from Pauly Shore.

Kill The Pain



If you've downloaded a Painkiller demo recently, be warned, it's not an official release. Like any other game worth its salt, gothic shooter Painkiller has been leaked onto the nefarious Interweb without publisher permission. We'll have the real deal on a coverdisc shortly.

28 Years Later



It feels like Duke Nukem Forever has been in development that long. And yet it appears no closer to seeing the light of day, as publisher Take 2 announced once more that DNF appears unlikely to be released this year. But does anyone care any more?

FIRST BANK OF GEEK

Your virtual currency is now real

Daniel Wilks

Making fun of obsessed MMORPG players is as easy as handgrenadeing dead fish in a barrel – kind of fun but ultimately too easy to be satisfying. Most of the time the targets are so easy that you just feel cheap taking the piss. Every now and then along comes a phenomenon that just leaves you open mouthed in wonder, simultaneously impressed, horrified and flabbergasted at the sheer geekiness of an idea.

The Gaming Open Market (www.gamingopenmarket.com) is one such idea. A few years ago the phenomenon of people selling MMO characters and items on eBay had

people raising their eyebrows in wonder but it soon became so commonplace that it lost all its nerdy charm. The Gaming Open Market takes the idea of online trading one step further by introducing the concept of an MMO currency exchange. Players who have wasted their lives in one game but are looking to move to another can exchange their money for currency of a different game – all for a small commission of course. Players can also sell each other their hard earned fake money for the real folding kind. The concept goes even further to the true heights of amazing nerditude by

actually having in-game bankers who can perform currency conversions, payments and deposits on the fly. The business opened just before Christmas but is already (at the time of writing) beginning to turn a profit with the site shoving over \$2500 worth of completed trades and another \$1000 or so in the offing. Although only offering the currency exchange at the moment, The Gaming Open Market will soon be opening stores to trade and sell characters, accounts and items. Maybe soon the creators will have the money to afford to move out of their parent's basements and date some real girls.

24450	DJ MICROSOFT COR
24460	DJ MOTOROLA INC
24470	DJ ANHEUSER BUSCH
INDU -27.22	UOLU 269.
INDP 11008.48	UOVL 112.
UTIL -.99	DUOL 134.
TRAN -23.70	TRIN .77

RIDLEY SCOTT'S DRIVER

Talk about Serious Marketing

Timothy C. Best

It would seem that Atari is going all out when it comes to pushing Driv3r going for a melding of Hollywood and game promotion that we haven't seen before. The company has hired Ridley Scott Associates (RSA) to make a three-minute short film based on the characters from the series which



will be the backbone on the Driv3r website and its advertising campaign.

While the plot of "Run the Gauntlet" is being kept secret we do know some things about game itself which should give us some hints. Driv3r is the third instalment of the series and it features the return of the Wheelman – an undercover cop pushing the limits – who is trying to infiltrate an international network of car thieves. The game features levels in Miami, Istanbul and Nice (that's in France). It sounds like a movie already; we have tough characters, lots of car chases, heaps of explosions and not much story to get in the way.

RSA was started by Ridley Scott

(Blade Runner, Gladiator) and Tony Scott back in 1968 and it has worked for Coca Cola, HP, American Express and Ridley's Apple ad "1984" won a bunch of awards.

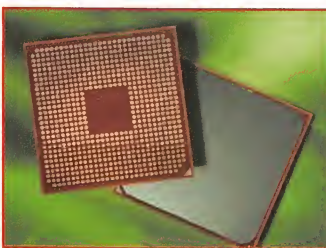
What probably caught Atari's eye however, was the work it did for BMW. The Beamer short films showed cars doing all sorts of irresponsible movie stuff that is illegal to have in a commercial. If people want to download a movie that just happened to be made by BMW and hosted at its website, that's not advertising, now is it?

When I hear about stuff like this I always wonder why they didn't get Ridley in to help with the game ... if it's good enough who cares about the ads?

GROWING FAMILY

Athlon 64 line sprouts exciting new varieties

Anthony Fordham



Gamers living fifteen minutes into the future and thinking of upgrading to a largely pointless but massively powerful 64-bit processor will soon be able to take their high-performance fetish on the road.

AMD has unveiled four new Mobile AMD Athlon 64 processors, targeted at gamers and people who

like to edit video in the field – the 3200+, the 3000+, the 2800+ and for those with cash to burn, the stupidly powerful 3400+.

Cost? You want to know the cost? Well obviously a mobile Athlon 64 is hardly something you're likely to be able to buy off the shelf, but dealers are expecting to pay, per unit, \$377 for the 3200+, \$300 for the 3000+ and \$248 for the 2800+, for orders of a thousand units. As you can see, these prices are hardly exorbitant.

The powerhouse 3400+ (which will also see service as a desktop unit) will cost dealers a rather

more significant \$537 per unit, for orders of one thousand. So, as always, expect to pay a premium price for premium power.

A number of manufacturers have already signed up to produce notebook PCs based on these little beasts, including, predictably, HP, Fujitsu and Packard Bell. Still no word on Apple finally seeing the light and making the long-overdue jump to CISC processing. Heh.

Expect benchmarks and performance analysis of the new chips (especially the 3400+) in an upcoming issue of PCPP.



BEST PC GAME
OF THE SHOW
ECTS

PC GAMER

"A shooter with a
scale that's rarely
been seen before"

PC Zone

"The scale of
the action is
virtually unparalleled"

Edge

"A vast tactical FPS
with some truly
innovative technology"

EXTINCTION IS NOT AN OPTION!

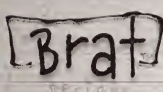
BREED

Join the USC and do your duty, soldier!

► **The situation:** Earth has been taken over by aggressive aliens known as the Breed.

► **Your mission:** Take them out, rescue survivors and reclaim the planet.

► **Your equipment:** A huge arsenal of weapons and a multitude of vehicles from tanks to fighter jets.

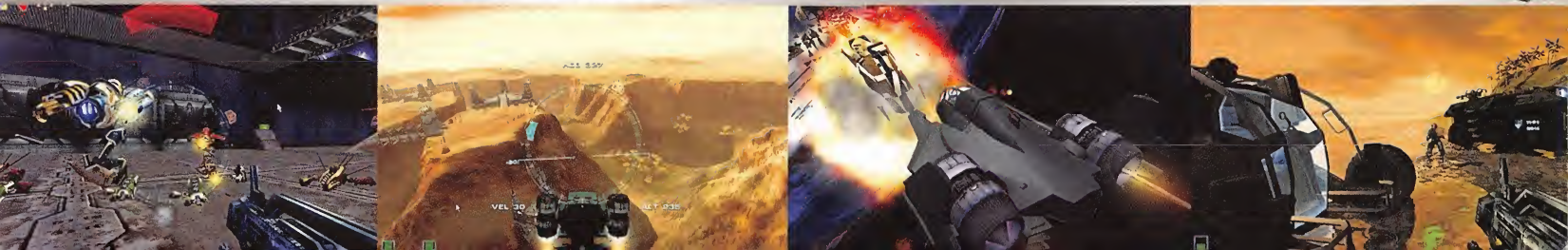


Release:

FEBRUARY '04

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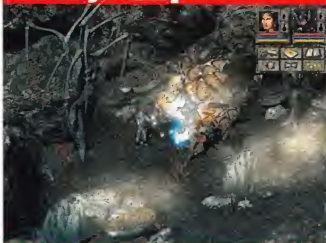


Mafia 2



It exists, that's all we know. Well, actually, all we really know is that Illusion Softworks has acknowledged they're working on it. So, chances are, they've had a team meeting and said, "Hey, let's do Mafia 2!" and maybe drawn a few guns and cars with dodgy steering.

Deity Surpassed



Larian Studios has difficulty with naming its games. First, old-school RPG Divinity became Divine Divinity, for no readily explicable reason. Now Divine Divinity sequel, Riftrunner, has morphed into Beyond Divinity. Again, for no discernible reason other than to get it back in the news again. Hey, it worked!

OH NO NOT AGAIN

World of Warcraft alpha build leaked to evil Internet

Anthony Fordham

As part of what appears to be a growing trend in the development of The Next Big Game, Blizzard has announced that files from an alpha version of its MMORPG World of Warcraft have been leaked to the Internet at large.

"In order to accelerate the testing process we recently allowed a small group of external testers to play the game. During this process, a collection of files was leaked to the Internet. While these files contain alpha content from the game, they are not fully playable and therefore do not convey the experience that World of Warcraft will provide when it is released," the press release reads.

First Doom 3, then Half Life 2 and now World of Warcraft. The possibility of an alpha leak now seems so assured that many fans are beginning to get suspicious.

"Nowadays it seems that every game in existence has a 'leak' at some point. Security cannot be THAT bad," says Bluenews forum member Creston.

"I'd suspect the developers are spreading this 'leak' stuff on purpose for PR reasons," says Valtyr, also on the Bluenews forums. While a publisher/developer conspiracy to get free PR seems unlikely, the continuing leaks are doing little to maintain faith in an industry that is still



sidelined by other media, despite dominating a large slice of the revenue pie.

In more positive news however, one of the external testers gave brief report on early gameplay with the hotly anticipated MMORPG.

"World of Warcraft is not an EQ clone. In fact unlike most MMORPGs, it feels less like a levelling treadmill and more like a fun adventure game. The world is HUGE, but I have only seen a little bit of it," says Silonez, a Blizzard tester. We now eagerly await a 'leak' of Duke Nukem Forever, or at least a 'leak' of George Broussard's timesheet to see if he's actually been doing any work at all on it.

MYTHIC SUES MICROSOFT

Get Your Own Name!

Timothy C. Best



Mythic, Mythica, po-tat-oes, pa-tart-oes, right? Well, not if Mythic has anything to say about it.

Mythic is looking for is an injunction to stop Microsoft using its name with an "a" added as the title of its upcoming massively

multiplayer game – which Mythic believes would let MS cash in on its reputation in the persistent world business. Mythic is also looking for damages which you'd have to imagine would be the legal fees.

In case you were wondering, this comes under trademark and unfair competition laws, things that MS know all about.

The suit was filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia in November, but Mythic has only just served Microsoft, giving the giant plenty of time for renaming before forcing the legal angle.

Overall, this is really a pretty

cheap move by Microsoft. It's not like many people will sign up for the wrong game thinking that they are getting Mythic's Dark Age of Camelot when they are really logging into Microsoft's Mythica, but the mind works in mysterious ways and Microsoft's game is similar enough to Dark Ages without having to call attention to the fact.

What puts the cherry on top of all this is the fact Microsoft is currently in a trademark infringement case of its own because a Linux-based OS named "Lindows" just isn't cool.

ATI TARGETS TINY

If NVIDIA Can Do it...

Timothy C. Best



A couple of months ago we reported that NVIDIA's was releasing a graphics chip for cell phones and PDAs, well it seems that ATI won't be outdone by its rival and is getting in on the act and adding 3D to boot.

The Imageon chipset allows for 3D graphics, 800 x 600 x 16 resolution, and uses a subset of PC Open GL.

It also offers high-end 2D

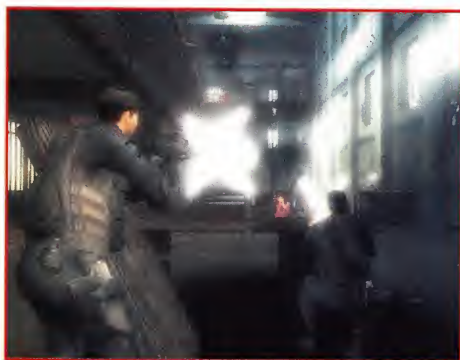
capabilities, support for high resolution camera sensors (1.3M and 2M pixels), handles image compression as well as MPEG 4 playback at an impressive 30 frames per second.

Running at between 14 and 80Mhz – depending on the power setting – the Imageon isn't going to blow away the card in your PC, but it also won't cause a noticeable drain on the mobile device and should only cost around an extra \$15.

Since ATI expects the Imageon to hit the market in the first quarter of this year, it's likely to beat Power VR mobile chip to the street making it the first high-profile 3D on the scene.

It's interesting to note that while NVIDIA jumped into the handheld market by acquiring MediaQ and their 2D accelerator, ATI built a chip from scratch to follow its 3D leanings. I wonder if NVIDIA would have gone 3D in any case. Right now, is it such a prize? Does anyone have a cell phone or PDA with the floating point calculations and a back-lit screen large enough to make 3D work at 800 x 600, anyway? I doubt it.

I guess ATI is hoping for a "if you build it, they will come," type of thing. It should mean the next generation Game Boy is really cool, though.



RAINBOW SEX

Securing POrn site

Timothy C. Best

Ubisoft is discovering why Hollywood always uses 555 phone numbers after a porn-linking incident with their game Rainbow Six 3. Deep in the Xbox edition there's a garage with posters advertising a certain website address.

One player, Tony Ashcraft decided to check out the URL and see what Rainbow Six goodies could be found. The unemployed IT worker was surprised to be pointed to a site that didn't exist. He soon

fixed that by buying the name and posting a whole heap of porno links.

Ashcraft says that he intends to build up the traffic and then sell the site. According to him this is cool since the game is aimed at people 18 anyway; so it's not like kids will be directed to the site.

What's more, Ashcraft says that he's not going to give up the site just because Ubi asks, although he's willing to sell it for the right price.

Representatives from the game co have said that they were just

trying to put out a fun game and that it was pity that someone had to go and do something like this.

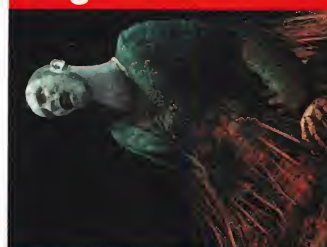
Really, it's hard to imagine that Ashcraft really intended to do anything but embarrass Ubi into buying his site at a nice profit and as such it's move worthy of a Clancy villain. Then again, movie studios have been dealing with this stuff for decades and if Ashcraft wasn't using it, it'd be a waste of perfectly good advertising.

Sim-Sational



The PC sales chart made for interesting reading over Christmas. For the week ending January 4, The Sims and its assorted add-ons held the top five places, with a couple more hanging around at 9 and 10. EA's grinning like the Cheshire cat.

Frightful!



Konami has unveiled Silent Hill: The Room, the fourth in the acclaimed survival horror series. Apparently you play a crazy man trapped in a single room with portals into weird places that may or may not be nightmarish metaphors for his unhinged state of mind. Sounds cool to us.



SAM & MAX 3D

The developer speaks out (but actually says little)

Anthony Fordham

Some of our younger readers might be scratching their heads at why we would get so excited about yet another 2D-point-and-click-adventure-in-a-3D-costume starring a dog and rabbit doing detective work, but Sam & Max: Hit the Road was truly one of the greats of that dim and distant holy past of adventure gaming.

Presumably because they couldn't think of anything new, Lucasarts is now slaving feverishly away at Sam & Max: Freelance Police, an updated 3D version of the classic adventure. With a new plot of course.

"I don't know if 3D has much to

do with the success or failure of any game," says Lucasarts project director Michael Stemmle, having obviously never heard of Lucasarts' Force Commander. "But I do know that Sam and Max look great in 3D."

The original was also famous for its novelty minigames, and Stemmle promises minigames will still play an important role in the new game. "There will be more minigames than you can shake a genetically altered lab rat at, which is a good thing because one of our dozen or so minigames actually revolves around the shaking of genetically altered lab rats. In space. In 3D," he says.

Like the original game, Freelance

Police will be made up of numerous amusing situations which blend together into what Stemmle describes as an "Uberplot."

"Exotic locales will include a low-rent space station and a lame-ass (sic) neopagan desert bacchanal," says Stemmle, "and the freakish bad guys will include an exceptionally honked-off Miss Congeniality and a rogue AI made out of tortilla chips."

No firm word on when the game will actually make an appearance yet, and the jury is still out on whether the intervening decade has been kind to either Sam & Max or their writers. Fingers crossed.

20 odd years ago Sony and Philips teamed up and absolutely revolutionised the music world with the invention of a nifty little medium called the Compact Disc. Now the guitar making giant Gibson is looking to revolutionise the industry again with a totally new idea dubbed "Magic" by the company's larger than life CEO, Henry Juskiewicz. Attached to a standard Les Paul, Magic converts the god of rock instruments into a digital tool of creation. Magic is essentially a digital converter and 100 megabit Ethernet connection that will allow musicians to interface their guitars directly with

their computers to streamline the act of creating as well as delivering much clearer digital sound. Amazingly enough, this is the first significant change to the electric guitar in around 70 years. Before anyone gets excited there are a few problems with the unit - there is no current guitar gear that interfaces with the Magic - no amps or effects pedals are compatible. Instead the guitar must be patched through a breakout box that can convert the digital signal back into analogue. Although the usefulness of the guitar in live performance seems to be a bit questionable, the real achievement

SIX STRING MAGIC

Crank it up to a virtual eleven

Daniel Wilks

of the Magic is its simple accessibility for music creation - players won't have to worry about USB cables or midi converters to capture their music. A simple length of Cat-5 cable is all that is needed to transfer the digitally encoded files, free of any of the interference, muddiness and lossy transfer that can sometimes plague the analogue world.



Arise Sir Sid



Civilization designer Sid Meier has been inducted into the Computer Hall of Fame alongside the likes of Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. Meier has been recognized for his work in "groundbreaking computer software". Worshippers should drop by www.computerhalloffame.org and kneel.

Phantom Showing



Infinium Labs' attempt at a games console was allegedly unveiled at the recent CES in Las Vegas. We say allegedly because by all accounts the machine was never powered on during the presentation. Instead, attendees were merely allowed to gaze in wonder at a box while Infinium reps spruikled on and on. Yawn.

CONMAN/PRONMAN

Cyber blackmail schemes elevate threat

Daniel Wilks

After receiving yet another Nigerian money scam email I was beginning to lament the state of today's confidence games. The Nigerian scam has been around for longer than you or I have been alive, the first examples of the con appearing some 35+ years ago. Imagine my delight when I found out about a new cyber-blackmail scheme taking the computer world by storm.

The scam begins with company computer users with active internet connections being sent emails threatening to install a virus on the user's computer that will delete a series of valuable files, crash the system or even download child pornography images to the desktop.

The email goes on to guarantee that the receiver will be safe if they simply pay a small amount of money (usually around \$20-\$30) into a bank account, the number of which is conveniently provided. Naturally if the receiver gives into demands they can expect to receive more demands in the not too distant future. So far authorities have documented cases throughout Europe and the United States with the usual targets being young and impressionable workers, secretaries and older worker without too much computer savvy.

Whilst the vast majority of these scams have proven to be just that, elaborate hoaxes designed to part a sucker and their money, a more

nefarious group of so called "hackers" have been making a tidy profit by extorting money from mid sized companies in the U.S. by threatening denial of service attacks during peak business times, effectively crippling the company during their most lucrative times and potentially costing them hundreds of thousands of dollars in lost revenue. Paying a small sum of money on the off chance that such an attack may occur doesn't sound so foolish anymore.

It used to be that people's lack of education was the major factor in scams but nowadays with our reliance of computers the fear of what we know can go wrong is just as effective a threat.

POMS LOVE GAMES

British games industry posts record revenues

Anthony Fordham

While Australia still continues to languish at the arse end of the gaming world (Star Wars Galaxies server? Here? You must be kidding!) the Poms are lapping up their games almost faster than the likes of EA and Atari can churn 'em out.

For the twentieth consecutive year, the British gaming industry's watchdog, the Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association (ELSPA) has reported that sales are up, up, up.

How far up? Well, in 2001/2002

the Poms forked out for 1.01 billion pounds worth of games, while last year they were happy to part with 1.26 billion for the pleasure of having something to do on a rainy Saturday afternoon. And believe me, the UK has plenty of rainy Saturday afternoons.

It's not all good news though - once results are tabulated, ELSPA expects to see a drop in hardware revenue for the same period.

Even though the sale of consoles and PCs remained the same in terms of numbers of units flogged,

the continuing price wars mean actual revenue should appear down.

ELSPA heavyweight Roger Bennett, remains upbeat however. "In the UK, video games industry sales have been on the rise for the last 20 years - it topped two billion pounds for the first time in 2002, and this year, once the final figures for all hardware are compiled, we will see that dynamic trend continue," he says.

Still no sign that anyone gives a shit about us down here in Australia, though. Damn it.



THE BEST GAME YOU'VE NEVER PLAYED

#3 ANACHRONOX

Anachronox, an epic sci-fi tale of good versus evil, was sadly overlooked by the very people who complain about a lack of originality in today's games. Awarded 85 by PCPP (#65), this wacky RPG from Ion Storm was doomed to commercial failure by poor advertising and Ion's obsession with hard-to-pronounce titles. While some were turned off by the excessive travelling, what makes Anachronox so great is its genuine humour and wonderful characters,

from the washed-up superhero, to the smack-talking robot, to the shrunken planet. At times hilarious and heart wrenching, Anachronox will have you wondering why more games can't be this good.

John Pike

Send your 100 word submissions to letters@pcpowerplay.com.au with the game title in the subject line.



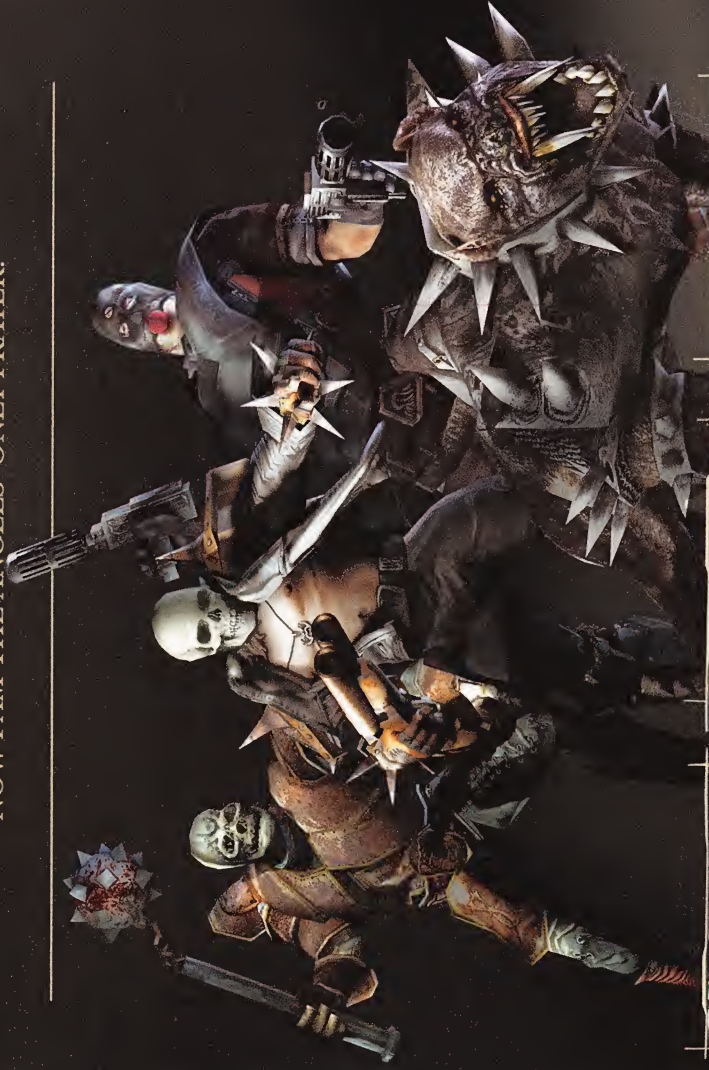
HEAVEN'S GOT A HITMAN

— I DIED DANIEL GARNER —

I WAS SENTENCED TO SERVE IN PAIN SOMEWHERE BETWEEN

HEAVEN AND HELL. I LOST MY FAITH, BUT GAINED A NEW NAME.

NOW I AM THE ANGELS' ONLY PRAYER.



24 Solo Levels



Hardcore Multi-Player



Advanced Physics

"INTRIGUED? YES, WE ARE..." - PC GAMER



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HOTWARE

All the bits that we cram in at the last moment with Anthony Fordham



MATRIX BINARY WATCH

Price: \$58.50 **Distributor:** Think Geek **Contact:** www.thinkgeek.com

With an increasingly teched-up population, the opportunities for displaying your total and utter geekdom to your friends, family and passing strangers are growing few and far between. EVERYONE is online now and EVERYONE has a PDA. They all know about LCD projectors, and plasma versus rear-projection televisions. What to do? The answer: get this watch. It tells time in binary. How many people do you know can read binary? What's that? YOU can't read binary? Fear not, because not only does the watch come with a detailed binary/English dictionary, it also has a discreet button on it that lets you quickly switch to normal decimal display so people actually think you're reading binary. Now if that doesn't charge your geek rod, nothing will.

PRISMATIC GLASSES

Price: \$27.50 **Distributor:** PC Case Gear **Contact:** www.pccasegear.com.au

Thank you PC Case Gear for providing us with yet another anti-vaccine for the Fat Plague. These glasses are specially designed so you can lay flat on your corpulent back and watch the TV at the end of your bed without lifting your head.

The glasses work on pretty much the same principle as a periscope, bending light so what you see is actually at 90 degrees to the direction you're looking. Amazing! Suitable for individuals who don't mind sitting up to watch the late late night movies, and are

particularly interested to find out what long-term use of these glasses does to your eyes, and also the kind of headaches they produce by the end of The Two Towers Extended Edition. Let us know, fatty!



ATARI CLASSIC 10-IN-1 TV GAMES

Price: \$32.50 **Distributor:** Think Geek **Contact:** www.thinkgeek.com

Do you have one of those friends who insists that the Atari was and still remains the greatest console of all time? Does he scorn the Gamecube for having a kiddie controller, the Xbox for being a PC on diet pills and the PS2 for being a tool of the Great Sony? Then you should bust out this nifty little device and remind him that despite all the shortcomings of today's consoles, we still have much to be thankful for.

This retro-style joystick plugs directly into your TV and has within its mystical guts ten great classic games from the Atari heyday - Pong, Adventure, Asteroids, Yar's Revenge, Centipede, Gravitar, Breakout, Missile Command, Real Sports Volleyball and Circus Atari.

Used according to the way Atari designed it, this thing mightn't be all that good, but if you get a couple of bottles of Tequila and some hotties, it could potentially form the core of a very interesting new range of drinking games.



FORD ESCAPE HYBRID 4WD

Price: TBA **Distributor:** Ford **Contact:** www.fordvehicles.com/escapehybrid



This bizarre culmination of the West's demand for bigger faster cars and paradoxically a more pronounced sense of social conscience in regards to the environment won't be available until next winter, but get your order in fast as they're sure to be as popular as low fat candy.

That's right - combine a gas-guzzling top heavy SUV with an environmentally 'smart' engine and you've got the ultimate guilt-free transportation and offroad sports vehicle - the Escape Hybrid!

What's more, Ford wants you to know that this is a 'full' Hybrid, which basically means you can switch off the petrol part of the engine and just run on electricity. Or, as seems rather more likely, vice versa.

Of course, the energy debt created by actually building one of these things is one you can never hope to pay off even after twenty years of coasting down hills and saving 20% on petrol bills, but who cares! It's an SUV! Fraser Island, here I come!

SONY PC330 DV CAMERA

Price: \$3299 **Distributor:** Sony **Contact:** www.sony.com.au

A lot of the fuss about video cameras these days seems to surround the 'network cams' that don't take tapes. Well for this grizzled old broadcast journalism graduate, tape is what made our media great in the first place, and we should respect and cling to it like drowning men clinging to a past that's not only on fire but also sinking with all hands. Anyway, enough with the metaphors - Sony's latest compact digital video camera is pretty much the same as its previous top model the PC120, except that the casing is black and the digital still image capabilities have been beefed from an execrable 1.5 megapixels to a more respectable (and actually useable) 3 megapixels. They've also managed to drop the price of the unit by \$700, which is good news.

Now you too can be an amateur video journalist and newspaper photographer AT THE SAME TIME! I tells ya, the opportunities you young tackers have are just amazing, you should make the most of them, why when I was a (snip - Ed)



KENSINGTON WIFI DETECTOR

Price: \$32.50 **Distributor:** Kensington **Contact:** www.kensington.com

Ever since your got your wireless-enabled notebook PC (for work or play) have you found yourself having to rely on warchalkers to get free wireless access downtown? Have you been eyed by the cops as you squint at arcane chalk markings on walls that may or may not suggest there's free net to be had at that location?

Perhaps you need a WiFi detector. This little device from Kensington doesn't need a PC or any software, and it lights up in different degrees of green depending on how strong the WiFi signal is at your location. Also useful for figuring out if you're close enough to hook on to a legitimate WiFi network that you actually have authorised access to. Expect to see this device used unrealistically

in an upcoming spy/hacker movie, in which the precocious kid uses it to hack in to the US Defence Grid or NORAD, in much the same way that John Conner used a crappy Atari Portfolio to hack into an ATM in Terminator 2.



ERATECH EMP-Z MP3 PLAYER

Price: \$239 **Distributor:** mStation **Contact:** www.mstation.com.au



See now, the problem I have with a lot of MP3 players is that they're just too damn bulky. Sure, the iPod is cool and all and the Jukebox Zen has a 60GB version, but they're just so BIG. Even the flash memory units still require the use of pockets. Pockets! That's just so 20th Century!

Thankfully Eratech has come to our rescue, despite having a kind of unsettling name for a manufacturer of precision electronics. This doughty South Korean company has created the world smallest MP3 player (for this month, anyway) - the EMP-Z! It's slightly larger than a 50 cent piece and claims to be lighter than two 50c pieces. As Eratech proudly proclaims, this means you can wear the unit as a pendant and be both stylish and rockin' at the same time! Memory is fixed at either 128MB or 256MB (128MB price shown) and the unit is so small there's no USB port on it - instead, the boffins at the Eratech labs have come up with an ingenious system to use the same plug as the headphones to both manage your songs and recharge the Lithium Ion battery. Swank!

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OUT TO PLAY Timothy C. Best

And Copyright For All

The more I think about it, the more I think Second Life deserves a big red cape.

To put that into context you need a few more pieces of the puzzle like the fact that I've liked superheroes since the days of the Vic 20. If I wasn't writing about games my combination of persistence and middling-fair artistic talent would probably have earned restraining orders from Marvel, DC and Image.

Nevertheless, I've still got a bunch of cool heroes scattered across half finished comic pages that I'd love to see prowling the streets of Cryptic's upcoming massively-multiplayer City of Heroes. I see them bringing super-powered justice and rescuing kittens from really tall trees but it's all a pipe dream because there's no way I'm going to risk my brilliant creations. It's not the diabolical villains that I fear, oh no, it's the law that's scary.

Internal Infringements

As it stands, there's a good chance that any hero I create in the game – no matter how original, cool or even completely naff – becomes property of Cryptic. It's all part of the terms of service thing you click past while installing games. Once I've clicked in, technically speaking, I could get in trouble for writing comics starring my own characters. Holy, copyright infringement, Flying-mammal-man!

At the very least Cryptic will have the right to alter, distribute, and use anything I've slaved on, royalty free, and without having to give me credit – which is likely to burn any aspiring artist since how they express ideas and the reputation that comes from it are the only stock they have. What all this means is that City of Heroes will get a hero I like, but not one that inspires me enough to try take them big-league.

In my case, that might not be such a loss, but I'm sure I'm not the only creative-type who holds out with their best material. It's a no-brainer that we're missing out on some amazing stuff because many potentially brilliant stars have locked away their illumination. That might not be a huge issue with something like EverQuest or Star Wars Galaxies where crafting is limited and characters are fairly specific to the setting but for something like Second Life it is a huge deal.

The whole point of the game is to let the players author the world. They are

given powerful in-game tools to create models, textures, animations and even scripts allowing them to make everything from rocks to dive off to UFOs and part of the magic of the world is watching people fashion things in real-time and watching communities develop, like fairy floss, strand by strand. When people started looking for player-versus-player action one guy designed and scripted guns, opened a shop and made a mint, creating a new mini-game in the process.

When another player watched one too many episode of Burgo's Catch Phrase the developers hopped aboard and funded the development of a Second Life quiz show with virtual cash and prizes. It made the world more interesting, so why not? Simply put, creativity makes Second Life go around.

Creative Change

That makes Second Life cool in its own right, but it's the little change in legal approach that makes this game cape-worthy. Now, Second Life participants get to keep the full intellectual property rights to anything they contribute, unlike in games like Sims Online, EverQuest, SWG, NeverWinter Nights and pretty much every other game with anything even resembling a persistent online world.

I see a new world where professional artists and designers can show off their work in a fun setting, where people can interact with it from every angle. The world could become a virtual portfolio, in interactive 3D, in a place that is accessible 24 hours a day.

No longer does the stuff you slaved on become gifts to the guys that set up the canvas.

No longer do you have to pick between what you want to share with your online family and what you may need to make a buck sometime in the future. No longer will you have to separate on-line and off-line design. Imagine wandering the world and finding the most awesome table you've ever seen. You buy the table in the game and then you can put in an order for the industrial designer to make you one in the real world.

Let's say that Ferrari wants to test a new concept car design but it's not too sure if people will go for the slick alien lines. You could quietly sneak a couple into Second Life and see what type of reaction you get from the people you



when people started looking for pvp action, one guy designed and scripted guns

find there, especially from your designing peers.

This all might seem a little utilitarian and a tad sinister, but it's not like the game wouldn't benefit from all of this leading-edge content. If you didn't like it you could always make a concept car-zapper or design goggles scripted to hide designs from the Wiggles, One Nation or Pepsi. Finally, just because people keep copyright doesn't mean that you have to let them brand the world with corporate logos ... well, not without charging them at least.

Creative Copyright

I can understand why most games keep such tight reigns on intellectual property. You can't stop people from around the world claiming that you stole their ideas, but you can have some manner of control over similar allegations coming from people walking a path that you've laid.

If you hire someone to write an episode of *Stargate SG1* (and goodness knows the show could benefit from the process) you wouldn't expect that person to keep ownership of the bug aliens they have gnawing on O'Neil. If the same critters appeared in *Voyager* it'd be

lawyer-time. If someone creates something for your world, you want to keep it in your world. You paid for it, you should use it. That's fair enough, but it's a little different when you're not hiring an individual but you are letting thousands of people pay for the right to give away their intellectual property. This is a new form of co-operative creation, with a scale of co-authorship that we haven't seen since communal storytelling.

For Second Life this isn't a problem ... it's the point of the game. The whole thing is an experiment in emergent gaming; seeing what people will band together to make if they are given the tools and a pretty backdrop. It is the perfect place to redefine the borders of massively multiplayer content and how it connects with the real world.

Here we have the chance to see what happens when players are allowed to use a virtual space as a 3D showcase rather than a place to slip into borrowed game assets. These new worlds need to recognise the people who help forge them, and they need to fling open the gates of our imagination, not restrain us to just opening them a crack. Maybe with a shiny new cape, Second Life will blaze the way.

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THE GUERRILLA GAMER

The Year That Was

Although this is only my first New Year's edition of PCPP, in the interests of appearing to have had a long and illustrious association with the mag, I'd like to say that around this time of year is when I like to present my annual awards to the gaming industry as a whole. It's the kind of format no great columnist can resist, and I'm no great columnist. So without further ado, let's get started with:

3D Gimmick of the Year

While environmental bump-mapping looked like a shoe-in for the second year in a row, the very late release of Deus Ex 2 really brought ragdoll physics to the fore for a likewise very late victory. As our own Editor said, "I'd hate to go back to games where there was no ragdoll." After all, when you shoot a guy in the face with a high-powered semi-automatic rifle, do you want to see some contrived, pre-recorded death animation randomly chosen from a pool of half a dozen? Or would you rather see him flip and flop down a flight of stairs to land bent backwards over a fire-extinguisher? In the words of Homer Simpson: "This is even more painful than it looks." Ragdoll physics adds nothing to the gameplay, but it sure is good for a laugh.

Benchmarking Controversy of the Year

It was depressingly easy to find judges for this tricky category - everyone but everyone on the PCPP Tech forums wanted to insert their two cents and watch the jagged hydraulics of this issue lurch into motion (it's a reference to those kiddie riders outside supermarkets, people). The winner was clear - nVidia's screaming hissy fit directed at Futuremark for daring to create a benchmarking program that actually measures the performance of a video card rather than relying on driver optimisations. Or, as real gamers would put it: "Who gives a shit?"

Duke Nukem Forever Reference of the Year

Plenty of nominations this year, however the clear winner was Dr. Derek Smart, creator of the Battlecruiser 'series' - he told an



interviewer that he was glad "DNF didn't get released. If it had been the industry would have run out of targets for tired jokes and we'd still be stuck with resorting to alienating Canada. It's still politically correct to poke fun at Canada right? Right?" Alienate all you want Derek, just don't expect them to play your tedious space epic.

Knee-jerk Fan Reaction of the Year

Goes unequivocally to the members of the Ion Storm forums, who on discovering that Deus Ex 2: Invisible War wasn't exactly the same game as Deus Ex flew into a howling rage and demanded that Warren Spector - who wasn't even responsible for most of the game - be hung, drawn and quartered. The developer was accused of 'selling out' to the console manufacturers since DX2 had no skill points system and picking up bodies didn't incur a movement penalty. Jeez guys, if you use up all your anti-console-sellout anger on DX2, you won't have any left for when StarCraft: Ghost gets released!

Installer of the Year

While console gamers continue to enjoy 'one button' instant installs, PC gamers remain at the mercy of increasingly convoluted install programs. There was no clear winner this year, so the installer that says "the installer has finished configuring

your system and will now restart your computer" BEFORE even installing the game still gets to keep the trophy. However, a special mention must go out to the SafeCast system which likes to take thirty seconds to "scan your disc" every time you want to play the game, and those great installers that finish with the third disc still in the drive and say "Would you like to run the game now?" and when you click yes they say "Please insert the correct disc and restart the application." I love that.

Redundant Packaging of the Year

A tie between the distributors of such games as Runaway which include a huge glossy box with a shrink-wrapped DVD case inside so you get an exciting pass-the-parcel feel as you unwrap it, and the new compact boxes which have a four-colour printed box on the outside and a fat DVD-size box on the inside with exactly the same four-colour print. We presume the redundant cardboard exterior is included to stop people opening the DVD case and flogging the discs, although why simple, cheap, recyclable shrink wrap isn't up to this task anymore is beyond us. Also, a special mention to those games that cost the full \$99, come on five discs, but only include paper slips for the discs instead of jewel cases. You cheap bastards.

Marketing Coup of the Year

Goes to the inimitable Vince Desi of Running With Scissors fame who spent thousands on highly contrived marketing events to promote Postal 2, including having scantily-clad bimbos fire big guns into the Nevada desert. All this came to naught when Postal 2 was featured for a few crucial seconds in the film clip for the Black Eyed Peas' number one single Where is the Love. The irony was unfortunately lost on Mr Desi who, like Rainier Wolfcastle, was asleep on a pile of money with many beautiful ladies.

Unexpectedly Not A Movie Tie-In of the Year

Easily won by EA's Need For Speed: Underground which is exactly like the execrable 2Fast 2Furious blockbuster starring a plastic man and his plastic imported sports car, except for the fact that NFS:U isn't actually execrable. It's ALMOST execrable, but thankfully Vin Diesel isn't in it. Although come to think of it, he wasn't in 2Fast 2Furious either, and that movie still sucked. Anyway, kudos to EA for realising that branding NFS:U with a 2Fast 2Furious license would have sounded the death knell for this otherwise kinda fun racer.

Catchphrase of the Year

Goes to Mediafamily.org for coining the word "killographic" to represent ultra-violent media, in the same way as "pornographic" represents, well, porn. In the spirit of the exercise, PCPP would also like to coin the following words: "crappythreedeeplatformerographic", "blandshooterographic", "fatanddiscreditedsportsstarographic" and "ionstormfansarestupidographic".

See you next year!

The Guerilla Gamer is a prematurely grey gaming journalist who goes to those trophy shops and gets a whole bunch of trophies engraved for different people and then hopes they'll all turn up to the awards ceremony in his garage despite the fact that most of the awards are not-very-thinly-veiled insults.

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TECH TALK: Stuart Calvin

Good enough for gaming?

I can't imagine how many ordinary, decent folk are turned off PC games because their rig is really just a dorky business unit. When Joe Blow watches Halo peel off an eight gig, 5400-rpm, PIO Mode hard-drive onto his 14-inch monitor through a 2x MX400, powered by a Celeron 766, it's hardly compelling viewing; it's downright criminal. They should go on trial alongside Sadaam with the added charge of proven stupidity. I doubt you'd be able to even install XIII or Call of Duty or Prince of Persia (ahem, good game I'm told, btw) onto any thing like that rig; yet the unwashed masses keep trying and trying and trying, and I get the "woe is me" letters filling up my Inbox. Many mainstream components just can't cut the demands of 3D games yet there is often little consideration given to the system as a whole. Walk into any PC store and check out a box, with a processor more powerful than the one in the Apollo Lunar Modules, and I bet my left nut that there's a dicky 40 gig hard-drive spinning at 5400rpm. A lot of these stores think that pixel shading is all about avoiding glare on the monitor in late afternoon sun.

A useful PC for gaming is all about moving data - fast, really fast. Ninety percent of the technology benefits for gaming are just as useful for home office computers. Remember the days when a WFWG 3.11 bootup on a DX33 called for a cuppa? Remember when you started Excel in Win95 on a Pentium 60? That was a beer or two. Now there are people, mainly mums and dads of young gamers, running Office XP on a Pentium II and still grabbing that cuppa; as Anthony F is wont to say - "it's insane"! Gaming on a PII is proof of that insanity. Come to think of it, a PIII is insanity as well. System designers, good system designers - those guys and gals who know that a quad installation of 15K Cheetahs needs a four watt Sunon fan farm to avert conflagration - create balanced designs where computation bandwidth matches memory bandwidth matches graphics performance. An outrageously poor upgrade is a waste of money. Like, an

upgrade from a TNT2 M64 to an MX400 deserves a quick blow to the head and sudden death. Of course, I'm assuming you already have a pair of RAID0 72GB Raptors, the 256MB FX Ultra/Radeon Pro and a gig of CL2 Corsair DDR400 Xtreme ... erm, where was I? I hope, dear reader, to inspire you now that there's a bit of spare cash lying around after the annual Christmas indulgence.

Motherboards, video cards and CPUs generally weld together as a team. To a lesser extent, so does RAM depending on whether single or double data rate memory is used. They all pull together and one or the other can pull a little harder for slower team members, but only up to a point. And that point is arrived at sooner than a bleed-out from a headshot. Given any configuration of these central components there is a corresponding window of upgrade opportunity, if you'll excuse the pun. It's basically a one-way street for motherboards as they must adapt to CPU and GPU advances. No vendor is going to manufacture a board that no current CPU or video card can use. As more powerful CPUs are developed there must be, at some point, corresponding physical changes to accommodate this new technology. Internal core voltages drop, pin-outs change and a myriad of other modifications demand a change in motherboard capabilities. Similarly, new graphics adaptors demand the same progress and when competitive advances in memory technology outweigh retooling costs for new fabrication, we have flank speed for some months.

I've recommended for some time now that the CPU bus speed should match the memory speed but the real enemy is memory latency or a bit of 'wait-a-while' every now and then. I read somewhere that an on-chip cache miss on a fast system will average about 80 processor clock cycles of latency for that instruction. Speaking of latency, heard of CAS Latency "2" RAM - get some!

The NVIDIA GeForce 4 MX range of adaptors are still new-ish, if outdated by the FX range, but they are good enough for multi-display, 2D office applications and web surfing. They are also good enough



pixel shading is all about avoiding glare on the monitor in the late afternoon sun.

for isotropic games (the look-down 2D perspective) like C&C Red Alert and Warcraft 3 but not good enough for DirectX 8, and later, 3D games. Only the GeForce 4 MX440 "w / AGP 8x" is suitable for high rates of pixel rendering but it can't cope with the geometry calculations required by 3D games. DX7 games are OK but it has limited utility for DX8/9 gaming. The MX range does not have the nFiniteFX II engine which incorporates dual programmable Vertex Shaders and programmable Pixel Shaders. The GF4 Ti series are the minimum solutions for 3D applications, semi-extreme gaming and HDTV/DVD playback. Most of the models are AGP (3.0) 8x, sport 128MB of memory and do incorporate programmable pixel and vertex shading making, DX8/9 games more compelling.

Frames per second (fps), or frame rate, refers to how many times per second the scene is updated by the graphics processor. Higher frame rates yield smoother, more realistic animation. It is generally accepted that 30fps provides an acceptable level of animation, but increasing the performance to 60fps results in significantly improved interaction and realism.

I've seen test results where a smaller, de-fragged, 5400-rpm disk was faster than a huge, fragmented 7200-rpm disk. There are satisfactory reasons for this paradox such as single platter versus multi-platter configuration, areal density and seek/latency times. The upshot of running a newer, faster disk is reliability and the capacity to do many things. Numerous games install a gig or more of files, CD backup programs need upwards of 750MB disk space for imaging, DVD movie backup applications need about 4.5 GB of free space for each movie, DVD Decrypter will need 9 GB or more for a complete DVD rip. Home movies, too, need LOTS of space for manipulation on the hard-drive. Windows XP takes a gig or thereabouts for an install, Office is gargantuan, games are DVD now (Tron and Silent Hill 3) and only g0d knows what's next.

I have a tip for the young, live-at-home gamers out there: if the Pentium II/III motherboard suddenly goes to heaven ... guess what? So does the whole system. Just keep hitting reset until sparks shoot from all sides of the box, just don't catch fire along with it.

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GAMES IN PREVIEW

No doubt by now most of you will have heard – if not played – *Manhunt*, the latest statement of intent from Rockstar Games. In a nutshell, the player is cast as the lead in a series of snuff movies where the objective is to kill for the amusement of the films' director. It's not exactly *Rayman*, is it?

We were as surprised as anyone when *Manhunt* on PS2 not only received a clean bill of health from the OFLC late last year and was given an MA 15+ classification, but didn't even need any censoring of any kind in order to do so. Both *GTA3* and *Vice City* were edited to remove the ability of the player to pick up a hooker – ostensibly because the fact you could recover your money by beating her to death afterwards made the violence sexualised. I find it curious that two games of exaggerated cartoon violence designed with tongue firmly planted in cheek are apparently in need of censorship, while one game of brutal graphic violence designed in all seriousness isn't. Of course, I'm not advocating either title should have been censored (or banned), I'm just noting what I perceive to be contrary decisions by the OFLC.

The New Zealand classification board did actually refuse to classify *Manhunt*, thus effectively banning its sale across the Tasman. The NZ OFLC concluded that *Manhunt* was potentially injurious to the public good and thus should be banned from sale for its likely effect on players both under and over the age of 18. Key to the report was the manner in which they felt the player was not only complicit in but had to enjoy and take pleasure from the murders they commit in the game.

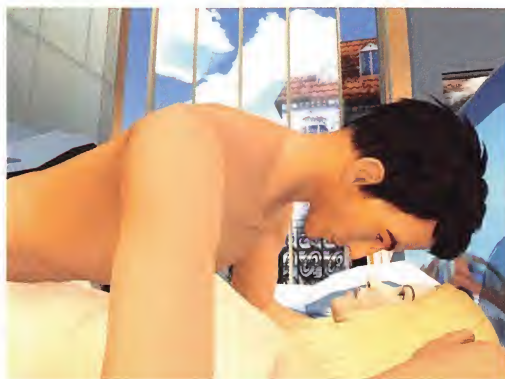
It's hard to find fault with the board's logic, if not their decision. You see, in order to progress through the game and unlock the extra bonus features, you must commit murders in the most gruesome manner possible. And you are "rewarded" with ever more graphic depictions of said slayings in brutal close up. The subject matter is disturbing; its execution (so to speak) more so. Despite its minimalist stealth gameplay mechanics, *Manhunt* on PS2 is not a fun game, nor even perhaps a game you could enjoy.

I guess, ultimately, part of me is pleased that someone like Rockstar is designing challenging and mature games like *Manhunt*, even if I don't actually want to play them.

David Wildgoose,
Editor



34 Stalker
Now subtitled *Shadow of Chernobyl*



29 Manhunt

30 Singles: Flirt up your Life

31 Breed

32 Mini Previews

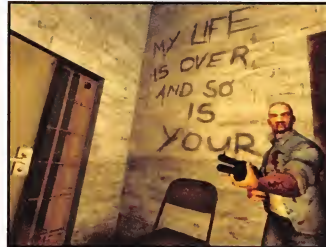
34 Stalker





Manhunt

Rockstar returns to push the boundaries of taste once more...



It seems like every game that has come from Rockstar in recent years has been surrounded by a storm of controversy. GTA3 was criticised worldwide for being too violent and for allowing players to both have sex with and kill hookers. GTA: Vice City was condemned on the same grounds and is currently under investigation to see whether the phrase "Kill the Haitians" contravenes American law. Whilst the Haitians are a gang in the game, the current level of political correctness almost necessitates that anything that could be deemed offensive by anyone should be purged from the collective consciousness. This is the country that has recently outlawed the use of the term Master and Slave for computer drives after all.

Now Manhunt is receiving unwanted attention due to the outrageously violent nature of the game and has already been banned in PS2 form in New Zealand. Curiously enough, Australia, one of the few countries in the world that censored Vice City had absolutely no problem with the PS2 version of Manhunt and fast tracked it through the process so it could be released in its unchanged form on time.

Bleak is a word that aptly describes Manhunt. Players take the role of James Earl Cash, a convicted murderer scheduled for execution. Unlike basically any other game or movie in which the main character is a murderer, Cash was not framed, not innocent and his crimes aren't even particularly justifiable - he is an unrepentant killer and not a particularly likable one at that. On the night of his supposed execution, Cash is given a "lethal" injection, only to wake up hours later in a locked room with nothing but an ear piece placed in the centre of a table to listen it up.

After being instructed to put on the ear piece, the game begins and



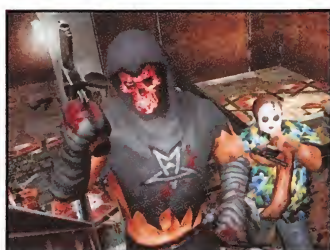
Cash has his first meeting with the villain of the piece, the malevolent fallen film director Starkweather, a man once at the top of his trade who now makes his living "directing" elaborate and gruesome snuff movies for an elite and secretive market. We said before that Cash was a particularly unlikable anti-hero but next to Starkweather (voiced by Brian Cox - William Striker from X-Men 2) he is a choirboy. The aim of the game from this point on is simple - Cash has to survive everything Starkweather throws his way using a mixture of stealth, combat and execution.

Each mission takes the form of a new "scene" in Starkweather's current film so from level to level you may be faced with objectives such as killing everyone on the level, escaping a shopping centre, reaching the far gate or escorting a bum through a gauntlet of killers. Whilst standup combat is possible, Cash is capable of executing opponents by sneaking up behind them and using any of the weapons he has at hand including plastic bags, shards of glass, bricks, baseball bats, knives, axes and what have you. The longer you can remain behind someone unseen with the button pressed the more graphic the execution - gain enough throughout the course of the game and you can unlock four "Director's Cut" levels.

Manhunt will likely make a killing when it's released on PC some time this year.

Daniel Wilks

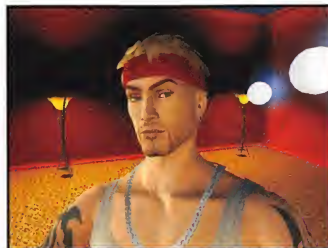
One of the most technically interesting aspects of Manhunt is the use of a headset. With a headset, instead of simply playing the sound through the speakers, Starkweather's voice will sound in the player's ear, emulating Cash's ear piece. Aside from making the game feel more personal, the headset also has another important feature - any sound made by the player will be picked up and transmitted into the game world, alerting hunters to your presence. Of course the player can use this to their advantage, taunting hunters into coming to find them and then letting them know the error of their ways.



Developer: **Rockstar** Publisher: **Rockstar** Distributor: **Take 2** Due: **Late 2004**

Singles: Flirt Up Your Life

For when The Sims just isn't hardcore enough any more...



Just when you thought that Japan was the only country in the world with dating simulators and love lives worse than mine comes news of a new Sims-esque game from Rotobee, a German developer nobody has ever heard from before and if the game lives up to its horrifying potential with any luck we'll never hear from them again.

Although most of the pertinent information on the game is in German, the general gist of the action seems to be that two eligibly 20-somethings live together and it's your job to make them fall in love by keeping them both happy (in much the same fashion as seen in The Sims) and eventually get them to make the beast with two backs or something to that effect.

As concepts go it's a fairly tried and true one - countless hentai games and dating simulators flooding Usenet and file-sharing use the exact same formula, only Singles promises not to have nearly as much bad midi, impossibly proportioned 14 year old school girls and pixelated bathing suit areas.

To add to the replay value, Rotobee includes 16 characters in Singles, making the game somewhat like serial stalking from the comfort of your own home - after you get sick of your current object of desire you can just go and find another person you can coerce into falling in love with you. Rotobee is kind enough to be an equal opportunity misanthropist studio so both male and female characters will be available to play. PCPP applauds the developer for giving every player, both male and female the ability to feel socially inept and kind of creepy without ever having to leave the house.

To make matters even worse there is a link on the official

homepage that goes to what could politely be described as a German "dating" service. I don't read German but the face being pulled by the woman in the popup window advertising the site is more commonly related to pr0n than going on a date.

Personal disdain aside, the screenshots can attest to the fact that the game does have an attractive looking graphics engine and character models boasting around 30,000 polygons. Unfortunately a journalist in a German magazine beat me to the punch and joked that 20,000 of these probably went into crafting the most realistically fake boobies yet seen in a game.

Singles also boasts 36 facial deformers allowing the various characters to show a whole range of emotions. To give the game a bit more variation, individual personalities will affect the flow of the relationships for all of the characters while a skill system will apparently let the characters grow throughout the course of the flirtation.

A number of us at the office are already fighting about who gets to review Singles: Flirt Up Your Life when it finally reaches our shores - cries of "bags not me" can be heard ringing out through Redfern.

Who will be the lucky pervert? The game is due out in Q1 2004 so we don't have long to wait to find out.

Daniel Wilks



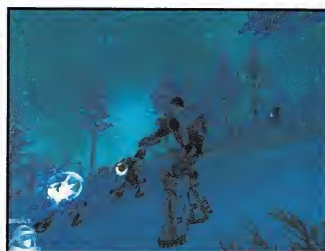
Although the basic premise of the two games may be different, the actual gameplay of Singles sounds terrifyingly similar to that of the most popular game of all time, The Sims. Whilst the player in Singles only has two characters to contend with they still have to attend to all of the daily chores, going to work, scheduling leisure time, eating and the like and furnishing the house in a manner that will prompt the characters to perform the dance of love with slap bass accompaniment. It's about time The Sims had a pretender, but honestly...

Developer: Rotobee Publisher: Deep Silver Distributor: TBC Due: Q1 2004



Breed

Looking every bit like Halo, but with shooty bits in space...



mixture of both squad-based tactical shooting and more frenetic run and gun solo action, but no matter the approach the goal is the same – exterminate all Breed you come across and save the last remnants of the human race.

Brat's proprietary engine, "Mercury", not only offers up some very tasty looking graphics but also takes a very clever approach to game design as a whole as it integrates all of the features needed in the final product so each of the members of the small team can work autonomously. The engine also allows the developer to test coding on the fly instead of having to re-render scenes, further streamlining the process.

Brat hopes to set a new benchmark in FPS with not only the seamless integration of vehicles and a somewhat non-linear approach to the retaking of Earth but also the ability to smoothly segue between land and space based combat as any sealed flying vehicle can leave the atmosphere and take part in the space battle raging simultaneously.

As far as the gaming community is concerned, Breed is already something of a winner having already taken top honours at ECTS 2002 winning the coveted Best PC Game award against strong competition including UT 2003 and Raven Shield.

Will Breed live up to expectations? Will it be the PC Halo killer press pundits have labeled it? We'll find out in a few short months when the game is released. For the UK based developer we certainly hope their game is a success – they've put a lot of faith in the title and are already planning the prequel as well as an inevitable sequel.

In the future man leaves the confines of the Earth and sets off into the reaches of space, colonising the nearest habitable system. All seems well but for one problem – there is something there waiting for them – the Breed, a race of bio-mechanical monstrosities built by their machine over-minds to do nothing more than wipe the existence of mankind off the face of the galaxy.

To save the colonists, a vast navy was dispatched from Earth, sailing through the depths of space with nothing but the fires of righteous indignation to keep them warm. The battle was hard won but eventually the humans prevailed.

What the navy did not know is that whilst the navy was off defending the colonists, another wing of the Breed back-tracked the human flight-path and launched an all out attack on the source of their problems, Earth.

Instead of being hailed as the conquering heroes on their return, having a chance to relax telling war stories and having drinks bought for them, the navy and all its surviving personnel discover that they are in fact mankind's last hope for survival.

From what we've seen so far, Breed definitely shows a lot of potential with hordes of great looking and intelligent enemies, a full armament of deadly weapons and the ability to drive/fly any of the vehicles found within the game.

Gameplay seems to involve a



Instead of playing a specific character, Brat has made the curious choice of casting the player as a succession of "Grunts", basic ground units with little personality. Whilst this may detract from the overall appeal of the main character, the choice does mean that players won't be trapped in a linear, character based single player mode and it should also give the game the definite feeling that its not just one man saving the world but instead the actions of many. At this stage we're not too sure if players can manually switch between grunts or whether that will happen between missions.



Daniel Wilks

Developer: **Brat** Publisher: **CDV** Distributor: **Red Ant** Due: **Q1 2004**

Conan

Developer: TDK

Due: TBC

A belated tribute to the Governor's loincloth era, Conan is reportedly 70% action and 30% adventure. That is, it's hack and slash with obligatory role-playing stats.



Crazy Taxi 3: High Roller

Developer: Sega

Due: Q1 2004

The first Crazy Taxi to make it onto PC. Imagine the taxi missions from Vice City, minus everything else from Vice City. This is a whole game of it. Cheers, Sega!

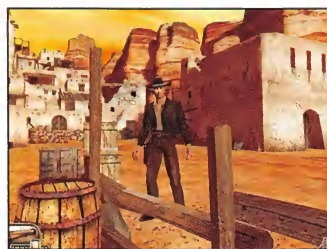


Desperados 2: Cooper's Revenge

Developer: Spellbound

Due: TBC

The original Commandos clone set in the wild west is back. Only this time it appears to be sporting a real-time 3D engine. Expect hair-rippingly frustrating puzzles, too.

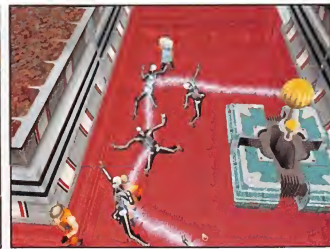


Evil Genius

Developer: Elixir Studios

Due: Q4 2004

From the devious mind of Demis "Republic" Hassabis, comes this chance to be a Bond villain carrying out harebrained yet ultimately doomed schemes of world domination.



Half-Life 2

Developer: Valve

Due: TBC

Don't know much about this one, but here's a couple of pics to pique your interest. It certainly looks pretty but we'll reserve judgement until we know more about it.

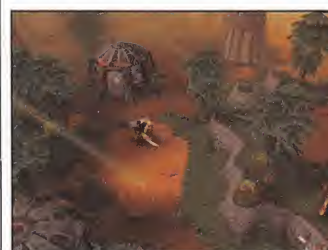


Space Hack

Developer: Rebelmind

Due: Q2 2004

Game titles rarely get more literal than this one. It's a Diablo-esque hack and slash RPG only - wait for it! - set in space. Space. Hack. Geddit? Sheer genius.



Vampire: The Masquerade: Bloodlines

Developer: Troika

Due: Q4 2004

If a game's quality was judged solely on the number of colons in its title, Bloodlines would be the best game ever made. It also looks a hugely promising action RPG.



Wanted Guns

Developer: Iridon Interactive

Due: TBC

Combining third person action, horse-riding and sneak'em up assassination with a cinematography inspired rail shooter FPS mode" Wanted Guns is nothing if not eclectic.



8th Wonder of the World

Developer: Funatics

Due: Q1 2004

From the creator of Cultures, 8th Wonder is another strategy title with a Viking flavour. Our Nordic heroes are this time up against an evil "nobody could grasp". Yikes!



Anito: Defend a Land Enraged

Developer: Anino

Entertainment

Due: TBC

The eponymous enraged land is actually the fictional world of Maroka based on the legends of generic 16th century Asia. This old-school RPG was developed in the Philippines.



Battle Mages

Developer: Buka Entertainment

Due: March

Harness chaos, nature or energy magic as you guide your guy with pointy hats through countless quests of role-playing and adventure type stuff. From Russia with love.



BiosFear

Developer: Nako Interactive

Due: TBC

See what they've done with that title there? How clever. It's from Korea so, as you'd expect, this is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game. With a weird name.



Ground Control 2

Developer: Massive

Due: Q2 2004

Massive has just unveiled the second playable race - the Virons, an organic, mystical alien race of huge warriors - to be found in this futuristic real-time strategy opus.

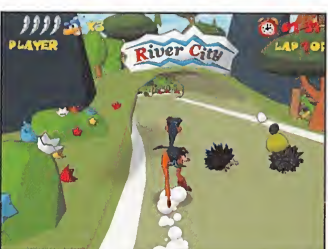


Ostrich Runner

Developer: Geleos

Due: TBC

Right. You're an ostrich. And you run. That's the gist of Ostrich Runner, unsurprisingly. We believe there's racing involved, but... um... yes. Did we say you're an ostrich?



Tribes: Vengeance

Developer: Irrational

Due: Q3 2004

Just a couple of new screenshots of Irrational's upcoming Tribes tre-quel. We'll have a lengthier report for you in the next issue. Plus more news on Daniel's alcoholism.

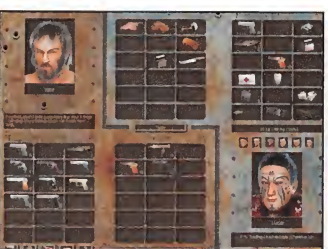


The Fall: Last Days of Gaia

Developer: Silver Style

Due: Q1 2004

Former Fallout 3 and Baldur's Gate 3 lead designer, Damien Foletto has joined the Silver Style team after the collapse of Black Isle to work on this post-apocalyptic RPG.





Stalker

Stumbling around ruined neighbourhoods while being pelted with radioactive waste and attacked by mutants is second nature to **Anthony Fordham** - after all, he lives in Canberra. So we gave him a week off, and sent him to Chernobyl to chat with the boys at GSC about their very exciting game.

At first I was very excited about the possibility of actually travelling to the site of the world's most famous nuclear disaster and seeing if the giant worms Matthew Broderick found there at the beginning of the world's most famous crappy monster movie, *Godzilla*, really existed.

However, after arriving at the PCPP offices in Redfern with all my bags packed and my passport swollen by a \$258 Ukrainian visa, I was informed that my trip would only be virtual in nature, and that I would be chatting to the developers of STALKER not face to face as I had hoped, but via the magic of the Interweb.

Wearily checking in to a seedy Redfern hotel, I reflected that at least the game seemed cool. In fact, there have been few games to cross the PCPP desk recently that have generated as much quiet, reserved and slightly suspicious enthusiasm as STALKER.

Suspicious? Why yes. Because not even *Deus Ex* sounded as good as STALKER on paper. The boys at GSC are more or less promising *Half-Life* meets *Elite*, a graphically lush, detailed game world that offers the player almost unlimited, freeform gaming within a generous 30 kilometre square zone.

That's right, no linear plot trying to fool you into thinking you're making a difference, a-la *Deus Ex* and *Deus Ex 2*, no crappy template-created random missions a-la *Freelancer*. Just real gameplay choices that make a difference.

In many ways, STALKER promises to be a hardcore RPG in FPS clothing. Like *Neverwinter Nights* (or at least, one of NWN's better expansions) STALKER will purportedly have dozens of side quests, or will simply allow the player to wander off into the wilderness and kill monsters. The player character will be customisable, upgradeable, and other -able words that only exist in the world of computer gaming.

So you can understand our suspicion. Can a single game really



a lush detailed game world that offers the player almost unlimited freeform gaming

deliver on all the dreams of the PC elite at once? Awesome graphics, awesome guns, awesome physics system, awesome freeform gaming, awesome choice?

Here at PCPP, we decided that it was high time that the team at GSC answered a few of our more pressing questions about the game. Primary among which is whether or not the game is still set to deliver on its incredible promises. Or, nearly a year down the track from its astonishing debut at E3 2003, has STALKER just become another, albeit very pretty, shooter from a hemisphere that's better known for the likes of *Serious Sam* rather than *Half Life 2*?

I got myself in the mood by downloading a "USSR Nuclear Reactor Core" skin for my favourite instant message client, and then contacted Oleg Yavorsky, PR manager at GSC using the special, Soviet-era code THQ had given me.

It was all very Cuban Missile Crisis, except you know, with the Internet. And better computers.

Once the slightly shaky connection was established, I didn't waste any time. I demanded to know if STALKER was still on track to deliver on all its slightly incredible promises, or whether drastic sacrifices had already been made to bring the game more into line with the current publishing zeitgeist - ie pushing crap on an unsuspecting population.

"On the contrary," said Yavorsky, "we've even developed certain new ideas for the project. Also, we took into account some ideas of the players."

By players, we presume Yavorsky means internal testers, since no one in the world at large, least of all the gaming press, has ever actually seen how any of STALKER's purportedly amazing gameplay will actually work.

Developer: **GSC Game World** Publisher: **THQ** Distributor: **THQ** Due: **Q2 2004**



X-Ray vision

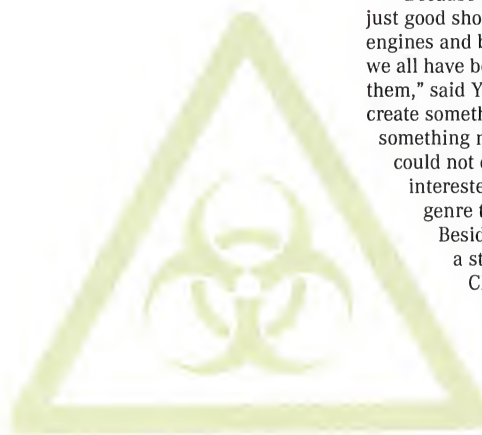
The most we've seen of it is the engine in action at E3, where it frankly put Doom 3 to shame and made Half Life 2 look merely good, rather than superfluously excellent. We were keen to know whether or not GSC had any plans to release a tech demo so the rest of us had a chance to work out if its advanced physics modelling would even work on our machines.

"At the moment all the efforts are directed into game improvement," said Yavorsky. "We also think of a possibility to support mod community of the game. As for the X-Ray engine licensing, we have plans to do this and at the moment we are on the stage of preparing the engine and documentation."

It's certainly difficult to argue that X-Ray isn't the best looking engine on the visible horizon, and the possibility that it will actually have a decent game attached to it makes it seem doubly sweet. But herein lies a puzzle. Now that GSC has a killer engine, why isn't the company just churning out a couple of WW2 shooters and making megabucks?

"Because there are quite a few of just good shooters with hefty engines and beautiful graphics, and we all have been rather tired of them," said Yavorsky. "We wanted to create something in our own way, something non-standard, so that it could not only make the player interested, but raise the FPS genre to a new level too."

Besides, the idea to build up a storyline based on Chernobyl history came naturally, taking into account that our company offices are just 100 kilometres away from the place of



it's certainly difficult to argue that X-Ray isn't the best looking engine on the horizon

the accident and we still clearly remember the events of 1986. Subsequently all those ideas grew into shooter STALKER."

Fallout 3?

Which brings up another interesting point. While games from time out of mind have been set variously in World War 2, the hellish biolabs of insane genetic scientists, the moon, even porn theatres, no one so far has paid much attention to the gritty, grimy, big-tech but low-tech setting of the remains of the Soviet Union. Which is odd, because the setting is obvious - there are thousands of abandoned warehouses

and nuclear silos dotted across the Siberian tundra, all of them packed with crates.

Yavorsky agrees (about the setting, not about the crates). "It is uncanny and depressing atmosphere of a suffered land, the consequences of man-made catastrophe that make the game out of the ordinary, and therefore interesting. Even now many visit the real exclusion zone to feel the atmosphere reigning there, see with their own eyes what the zone has turned into. In the game, apart from neglected structures and entire cities gradually covering with forests, radiation and wild animals there will be mutants, physical anomalies and eerie creatures. Besides, we hope that a typical post-Soviet entourage of the game will serve an additional point of attraction for the players."

Frankly, I'm ready for a slice of post-Soviet entourage, especially if my own entourage includes a hired mercenary with a big gun, a gun so big its size is only exceeded by the





sheer massiveness of my own gun.

Which makes us wonder as we wander. What exactly is the player supposed to DO in this ruined land? Pillaging abandoned storage sheds for cans of the USSR equivalent of spam doesn't seem immediately enthralling, even if that spam is guarded by hideous mutants.

Mutant MO

Yavorsky explains further. "Under a total freedom of action the player will be led by a powerful storyline. It will bring him to one of the eight possible endings of the game. With the use of various devices and equipment, he will be able to orient himself on the terrain knowing for sure where he's heading and how to get back. Though, if the player does not want to engage into unveiling the storyline and solving the tasks given, he can have a free life inside the Zone, moving in any direction and participating in the events as he wills."

Or liberating spam from evil mutants, in other words. Once again STALKER promises the holy grail of gaming - spam collecting for the fetishists, and a real story for kids brought up on 90 minute movies.

Like any good RPG, STALKER will give the player smaller tasks to complete in pursuit of the primary



plot. "Typical stalker missions will be collecting rare artefacts, rescuing somebody lost in the Zone, getting hold of secret data and so on," said Yavorsky.

"These tasks can be picked up from dealers or scientists in stalker clans. Challenges will be faced on every corner. This includes hunger and fatigue which can make stalker faint or even die, radiation, deadly anomalies, invisible for an unaided eye, mutated animals and humans, monsters with paranormal abilities. And, certainly, an age-old human opponent - another human. Hostile stalkers, army preoccupied with catching them, simply greedy 'colleagues'. There can be several solutions to one problem, depending on preferences of the player. This ranges from trivial 'no man - no problem' up to stealthy sneaking behind the backs of the enemies or diplomatic solving of a conflict."

It took me a while to figure out just what the hell Babelfish was translating here, but what Yavorsky seems to be saying is that there will be numerous variables impacting on the player, and the interaction of these variables will be translated into complex gameplay.

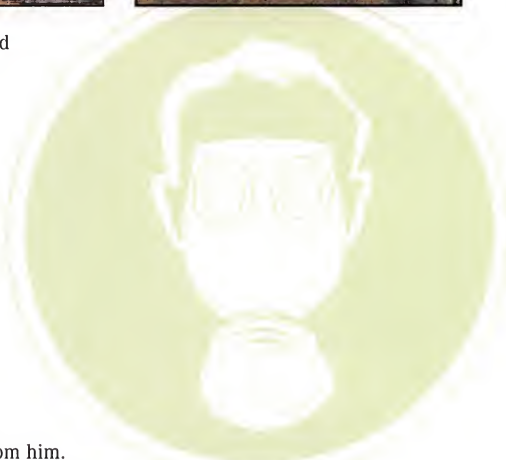
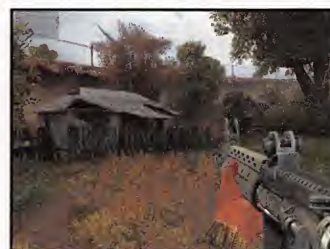
Choice mate!

Of course, what we have a major jones for here at PCPP is choice. Will STALKER provide choice? Yavorsky seemed to think so.

"The game will offer lots of options of how to accomplish a task, depending on preferences of the very player. He can become an inconspicuous sniper, stealthily

lurking in the shadow and barely making use of weapons (*Except for a sniper rifle, presumably - Ed*). Or he can be a brave commando, attacking all around and breaking his way through towards the ultimate goal. It will also be possible to accomplish tasks with somebody else's hands - by mere waiting for a successful stalker returning with valuable booty or having elicited important information from him. The selection of path you will follow is up to your imagination."

We therefore anticipate being able to climb an abandon water tower with a 360 degree view of the countryside, and wait for a "successful stalker" to come trip-



there are thousands of abandoned warehouses dotted across the Siberian tundra, all of them packed with crates





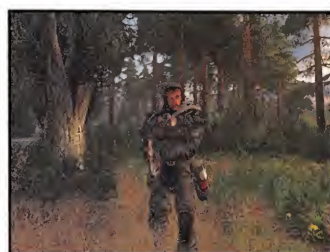
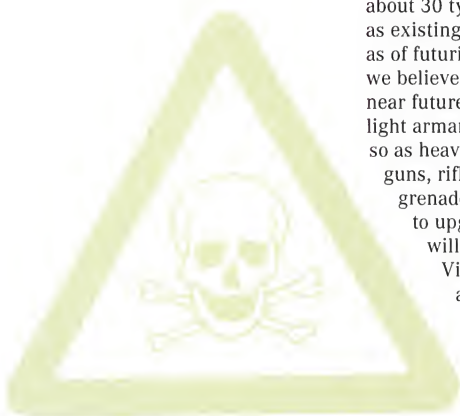
trapping along, whereupon we'll descend from the heavens screaming a terrible battlecry, fill him full of lead, flog his booty and get the credit for it back at base camp. Sounds fun.

Of course, fun is only as fun as the guns. Or something. I grilled Yavorsky at length on the different kinds of weapons that would be available to the player throughout the game, and Babelfish - after much grunting and clanking - eventually game back with this:

"The player kick off with a pistol of 'Makarov' system, and as he goes he gains a sufficient amount of money to buy more sophisticated equipment and to repair/upgrade it. Also weapons and ammunition can be picked up from killed enemies, as well as locate in the Zone.

"All in all, the game will feature about 30 types of weapons, made of as existing weapon prototypes, so as of futuristic ones - the ones, as we believe, will be adopted in the near future. Here you will see as light armament - pistols, shotguns, so as heavy ones - submachine guns, rifles, machineguns, grenade launchers. A possibility to upgrade every weapon unit will increase this number.

Virtually any piece can be amplified with laser sight, for submachine guns - a barrel-attached grenade launcher and silencer can be applied."



descend from the heavens, fill him full of lead, flog his booty and get the credit for it back at base camp. Sounds fun

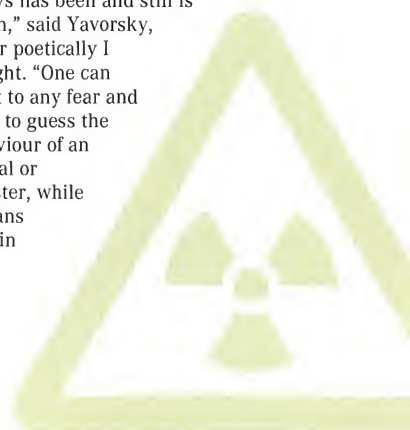
Toy shop

Lots of toys then. Just what we like. Of course, getting access to those toys is the other half of the fun of using them. Yavorsky said weapons can be found lying around, but like in any RPG worth its salt, rare and secret models will have to be purchased from scientists or the military. But Yavorsky wasn't content to just talk about guns.

"Apart from weapons, a trip in the Zone will require radiation metres, scanners, compass, terrain maps, multitude of other gimmicks to detect anomalies and living creatures. Special suits and flak jackets of various sorts and levels will serve a protection from different types of damage. Some will protect you from radiation, other - from acid burns, third ones - from gravity anomalies and mechanical damage. All this will wear out, so the player will have to keep an eye on condition of equipment and ammunition. This also includes the condition of weapons."

Having guns and cool equipment is one thing, but having something to use them on is quite another. GSC promises STALKER will be filled with everything from rogue military patrols to mutant beasties. I wondered what the most dangerous enemy in the game could possibly be.

"Of course, the most dangerous enemy for a man there always has been and still is a man," said Yavorsky, rather poetically I thought. "One can adapt to any fear and learn to guess the behaviour of an animal or monster, while humans remain





unpredictable. Monsters in the game will be strong and guileful, but stalkers – guileful and smart. That is why in STALKER you will have to fear monsters, but be most watchful for humans.”

In the Zone

This whole package comes together in the 30 kilometre square Zone, an area turned weird with radioactive pollution from consecutive

Chernobyl explosions. It's a mysterious area, full of bizarre anomalies and the aforementioned mutants. It's the whole reason for the game, according to Yavorsky.

“The game storyline is a history of the Zone itself,” he explained, “with its riddles and mysteries. The player will have to reveal the reasons of the zone appearance, puzzle out its mysteries. Things discovered in the process of the

game will help lift the veil covering various secrets.”

Ambitious is hardly the word. GSC mentions Half Life, Deus Ex and Elite, almost all in the one sentence, whenever it does a two-minute press “bite” on STALKER. Does the company honestly expect to be able to surpass all three games with this debut title?

“We are not claiming it will be better,” Yavorsky said. “It will be different, unlike any of the three. The Stalker has its own personality – realistic world, life simulation system, freedom of actions, storyline, photorealistic graphics... This list is far from being full. But it is better to not run ahead of time and wait until the game is released so that you can compare it with whatever you like.”

Fingers crossed

Oh believe me, Oleg, we will. We want STALKER to be good. We want it to be good so badly. And yet, the game is SO ambitious and SO



massive in scope, we cannot help but feel scared for GSC. In the cutthroat game of computer game development, for every modestly promoted Deus Ex there have been a dozen Daikatanas, SiNs and Red Factions. Which leaves one question for Oleg Yavorsky and the team at GSC. Which is more important to them, to produce a genre-busting, definitive game that no bastard will bother playing, or a smash-hit shooter for brain dead corporate types too smashed by office politics to bother thinking about their games?

Said Yavorsky, “We’d like to both, actually. Anyway, if we achieve only one of the two we won’t be disappointed. It is a way worse when you get none.” That’s so true. Good luck guys.





How was 2003 for you? Or, more to the point, how was it for us? In an effort to kickstart a new tradition, we present this issue for the first time ever, the PCPP Awards. Over the following pages we'll tell you what we thought were the highlights of the past twelve months, hand out a few gongs to the leading lights, and reflect on our own personal favourites. Meanwhile, **Daniel Wilks** will guide you through the year's major events in PC gaming. Enjoy...

2003: A Year in Review

2003 – yet another year come and gone in a flash. Three years (or two depending on your school of thought) after the millennium and still no sign of the impending technological holocaust prophesised by many a tech fearing pundit and religious loon. Instead of planes falling out of the sky, 2003 was a year of typical ups and downs, some more pertinent than others. As is now typical, 2003 saw hardware undergo yet another revolution, bringing in not only the hyperthreaded P4 CPU but also the wildly successful Radeon series of DX9.0 cards and the less than perfect (though catching up) GeForce FX cards. As a result gamers were promised greater and greater things from their games – far improved graphics and framerates, tighter AI routines and physics that would make the real world look a little unrealistic. It was the year the big names were set to return and light the PC gaming world on fire, showing the new kids on the block how to kick it old school whilst still revolutionising their respective genres. It was the best of times, it was the blurst or times...Bah, stupid monkey!

Although January is typically a very slow time in the PC gamer's schedule, 2003 was ushered in with not one but two gold awards for Age of Mythology and Mechwarrior 4: Mercenaries. The fact that both games were developed and published by Microsoft also garnered PCPP its first round of accusations of selling out to the evil empire for the New Year. The release of Civ III: Play the World also gave avid strategy fans the opportunity to play one of the most addictive games online. Unfortunately Play the World also proved to be one of the slowest and most niche of multiplayer games (aside from play by email games). February saw only one gold award from FIFA 2003 but aside from one obvious exception the entire month was filled with decent to excellent games. That exception was, of course, 007: Nightfire, the first massive disappointment of the year, possibly killing the James Bond franchise on PC before it was even established as a possibility. The failure of the game was made even more crushing

when the game was compared to its console counterparts – all of which were good. Could a port possibly make a game so flawed? Let's never find out.

March only boasted a single gold award for Sim City 4 but was once again a great month for game releases overall with 8 games scoring about the 70 mark. It was also the month when we lost all contact with the old tech editor Jere Lawrence for a while due to his love/hate relationship with Raven Shield. April proved to be another storm of controversy and quite a lacklustre month in gaming all round. Issue #85 saw the release of Freelancer, Unreal 2 and Splinter Cell – three of the most hotly anticipated games of the early part of the year. Unfortunately as fate would have it, two of the three games were big disappointments after their lengthy development periods and spectacular pre-release hype. Freelancer from Microsoft promised to be the next Elite but ended up being a great but fairly contained space shooter with only cursory trading aspects, while Unreal 2 proved to be the supermodel of the PC gaming world – beautiful yet vapid. Along came May and more disappointment with the release of the hotly anticipated Command & Conquer: Generals and the Battlefield 1942 expansion pack, Road to Rome. Whilst a good RTS game, Generals proved to actually do little as far as the genre was concerned aside from wrap the standard action in an attractive graphics engine. Road to Rome fared even worse by taking many of the aspects people loved about Battlefield and toying with them. Be that as it may, the flaws of both the aforementioned titles pale in comparison to those of Metal Gear Solid 2: Substance. If a console port is done well PCPP is all for them. We love the Tony Hawk games and Splinter Cell – the Xbox port received a very respectable score of 88 – so our problem is not platform bias, it's the lack of effort put into many of them. Substance is the perfect example, literally being a direct port and requiring 7.7Gb of HDD and for the player to hit the "start" button to begin.



Enter the Matrix. Three words guaranteed to polarise a room. It's a game you either love or hate and much to my chagrin, at the time of the review I fell into the former category. In my defence, believe it or not, the code I played at Atari's office was actually better than what was shipped – it ran slower and smoother and really didn't suck. Without a doubt July was the biggest month for hate mail due to the review of the movie tie in. Luckily the same month saw our intrepid editor, the Goose, bring us the first spooge-worthy screenshots of Half-Life 2. Little did we know that in a few scant months the infamous HL2 hacker would leak the source code, prompting Valve to go back to the drawing board for its online code, delaying the game until 2004. Of course, the delay of the game due to the leak also gave rise to all manner of conspiracy theories, an in-house favourite being that Valve wouldn't be able to make their proposed release date so leaked the code themselves as an excuse to delay. August may have brought the sexually violent vampire, Bloodrayne, to the PC but her leather clad boobies held no attraction to gamers Australia wide compared to what could be roughly equated to the arrival of royalty. August was the month

Daniel Wilks

TOP 5

1. Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time – everything a sequel should be; bigger better and more entertaining than the original.
2. Tron 2.0
3. Gothic II
4. Max Payne 2
5. Knights of the Old Republic

David Wildgoose

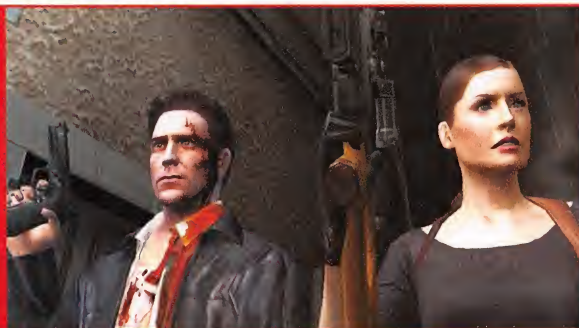
TOP 5

1. Championship Manager 4 Season 03/04 "Must... get... Cambridge... promoted... to the Premiership!"
2. Vice City
3. Call of Duty
4. Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
5. Silent Hill 3

Best Technical Achievement

1 Max Payne 2 (Take 2 Interactive)

As it stands, Max Payne 2 is the best looking game currently on the market but that's not the reason it wins the best technical achievement of 2003. That honour goes to the seamless integration of the Havok 2.0 physics engine which was initially meant to make its debut in Half-Life 2. The Max Payne 2 campaign may be on the short side but the incredible physics model makes every battle effortlessly spectacular and just downright cool. The physics are made even cooler when you add the improved bullet-time. Playing kip-up with a killer and an automatic shotgun is criminally fun.



2 Planetside (Ubi Soft)

Planetside may be deeply flawed in execution but it is a shining example of the shape of things to come. Only a year or so ago the idea of a 64 player online shooter was something of a pipedream but Planetside goes even further by giving us a massively multiplayer experience where hundreds of players can shoot it out at once. The net-code may be a bit laggy but for a first attempt Planetside's a winner.



3 IL-2 Forgotten Battles (Ubi Soft)

If you're talking about realistic flight physics and aerial combat models you can't go past IL-2 Forgotten Battles. It's high on perfect. Each aircraft handles uniquely and the controls are just about perfect. Seen next to Combat Flight Simulator, IL-2 looks as graceful as all get out and Microsoft's genre entry looks like a badly lobbed brick.



4 Call of Duty (Activision)

We've never seen the Quake III engine perform so damn well and it's doubtful we ever will again.



5 XIII (Ubi Soft)

Simply put XIII boasts the best use of cel-shading in a game and format, ever.

Best Gameplay Innovation

1 Planetside (Ubi Soft)

Traditionally the problem with massively multiplayer games has been the amount of time you have to dedicate to the games to achieve anything or even really enjoy yourself. They also have a disturbing habit of being very similar to one another. Planetside totally breaks the mould, both in genre and in style. Imagine a team based deathmatch FPS. Now imagine that there are hundreds of players on each team. Add in the ability to level up your character through progressive kills and you have the most innovative, though flawed game of the year. How long do we have to wait for a sequel Ubi Soft?



2 URU: Ages Beyond Myst (Ubi Soft)

By taking the now traditional Myst style gentle adventure/exploration game, moving it to true 3D and making it massively multiplayer, URU has really created a whole new genre - the cooperative online puzzle game. There's no competition, combat or even really a winner so all that is left is friendly cooperation.



3 Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time (Ubi Soft)

See a pattern forming here? Reversing time, freezing time, intuitive and spectacular combat, brilliantly acrobatic movement that is essential to beat levels and the best iteration of bullet time yet make this sequel/remake hugely worthwhile. For some reason it hasn't sold too well as yet, so go out and bloody well buy it. Now!



4 Impossible Creatures (Microsoft)

Breeding killer animals for fun and profit r0x0rs your b0x0rs.



5 The Sims Online (EA)

Nobody actually played TSO but the idea of an online life sim is definitely an intriguing and compelling one.

Amos Hong

TOP 5

1. Madden 2004 - Controlling the concession prices, hiring and firing coaches and moving your team to another city, the new Owner mode in Madden rocks!!
2. Call of Duty
3. Star Wars: Knights the Old Republic
4. Max Payne 2
5. MVP 2003

Best Hardware

1 Athlon 64

For a year that started off pretty badly for AMD, with waning sales and a company going deep into the red, 2003 actually ended up being a bit of a ripper for this Chipzilla wannabe. And it's all thanks to the long delayed Athlon 64 series, the first 64-bit compatible CPU to hit the desktop. Available in two flavours, the uber expensive FX and the plain Jane Athlon 64, both of these chips managed to steal the performance crown back off Intel, who had been holding it tightly since the release of its Northwood Pentium 4s. It didn't matter that there was no 64-bit

operating system, nor any 64-bit consumer level applications, to make the most of the chips 64-bit capabilities. The fact that these chips only ran at around 2GHz didn't hurt these chips either, as they still stuck it to the 3.2GHz Pentium 4 (in gaming applications at least, which is all PCPP cares about). While there was confusion about the future of the socket design, this should be rectified by March 2004 with the release of Socket 939 Athlon 64s, and prices have plummeted, offering even more bang for your buck. Hats off to AMD for the finest technology release of the year.



2 Radeon series

If you bought a video card in 2003 that wasn't made by ATI, chances are you didn't make your purchasing decision based upon solid benchmark results. Time and time again ATI's cards romped it in when compared to its competitors, especially when all of the eye candy (anisotropic filtering and anti aliasing) was enabled. It's amazing to think that only a couple of years ago ATI were seen as the poor man's graphics card manufacturer, yet in the year 2003 it firmly established itself as the leader of the pack.



3 HyperThreading (Pentium 4)

Unless you've run a Pentium 4 with HyperThreading, you probably don't know what you're missing out on. However for those of us who do, the difference it can make when multitasking is simply phenomenal. No longer do we have to limit ourselves to one or two applications at a time; with HyperThreading enabled it's possible to have four or five applications running with nary a hiccup or stutter. It didn't revolutionise the gaming experience, but for day to day PC usage HyperThreading has proven to be a worthy technology.



of GTA: Vice City, a game that absolutely everyone (aside from communists and hippies) loved. They loved the freeform nature of the game,

Battlefield 1942 for the top honours. No other game had given the sublime feeling of fun and replayability it has. A number of familiar faces also made their sad departure from the list. Gone were Duke Nukem, Lara Croft, Star Wars, Twinsen,

Angel of Darkness took a once great franchise out the back and put two bullets in its head, execution-style

the plot, the music, the controls, the look - everything. Even dedicated console port haters loved that game. The release of the retail version of Day of Defeat also cemented an idea that had started the year before - the commercial release of successful and popular mods. Vivendi had already scored a winner with Counter-Strike and the Activision published DoD proved equally good (some would say better) and popular. It will be interesting to see if any other distributors will start releasing popular mods for retail release - EA could definitely be on a winner with a boxed copy of Desert Combat, that's for sure.

September meant it was time for the annual Top 100, traditionally a time of much controversy and reader mail/email/phone calls/letter bombs. After much drunken bickering we chose

Quake and Rayman. Their days in the sun are over. Although the Top 100 is always a popular issue, September was a bad month for games with not one award being given in nine reviews. The game of the month turned out to be Microsoft's Flight Simulator 2004: A Century of Flight, once again prompting some of the more excitable readers to once again accuse us of selling out. No awards were given away in October either. This is not to say that there weren't good games that month - there were - just none worthy of great acclaim. Lionheart, Midnight Club II and Shadows of Undrentide gave us hope, Republic was an interesting failure and Angel of Darkness took a once great franchise out the back of the establishment and put two in the back of its head, execution-style. Issue #92 in November left us scratching our heads.

Imagine our surprise when a Tron game appeared unannounced on our desks and turned out not only to be the game of the month but a gold award winner as well. What left us confused was the lack of effort EA put into marketing the game, choosing to simply release it without fanfare instead of giving it the push it both needed and deserved. Speaking of marketing, Activision pushed Jedi Academy for all they were worth and guess what - it turned out to be another poor excuse for a game from anti-developer, Raven.

December saw ten games released for the Christmas but only one of any real importance. After two years of being on the Xbox and countless arguments as to whether Microsoft was trying to kill PC gaming by "stealing" all the good titles, Halo finally made it to the PC with decidedly mixed results. All of the elements that made the game great on console remained in the port. Unfortunately all of the things that made Halo a console game also stayed. Laggy mouse, low frame rate, repetitive level design and poor aiming took what could have been a great game and rendered it merely good. The final issue of 2003 was filled with great games but only one need be mentioned. One game - three words. Call of Duty. If you've played it, you understand. If you haven't, put down the magazine (after you've reread it a few times) and buy the damn thing.

Timothy C. Best

TOP 5

1. Knights of the Old Republic - Light sabers, scoundrels, duels and the temptation of the dark-side, all wrapped in BioWare quality.

2. UFO: Aftermath
3. Ghostmaster
4. Tron 2.0
5. Homeworld 2

Bennett Ring

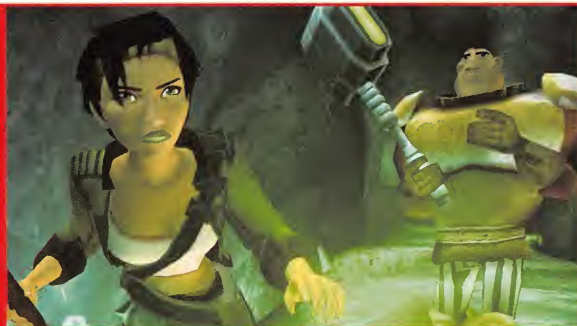
TOP 5

1. Desert Combat - 64 players armed to the teeth with modern tanks, choppers, fighters, artillery & machine guns, all spread out over massive maps. What more could a first person shooter fan ask for?
2. Call of Duty
3. Lock On: Modern Air Combat
4. America's Army
5. IL-2 Sturmovik: The Forgotten Battles

Best Publisher

1 Ubi Soft

Without a shadow of a doubt Ubi Soft was runaway winner of publisher of the year. Their release list reads like a who's who of great, innovative or just downright fun games. Planetside, XIII, Prince of Persia, Beyond Good & Evil, Splinter Cell, URU, Raven Shield, Shadowbane, IL-2 Sturmovik: Forgotten Battles and LO: MAC. These are just the PC titles. Sure, Ubi is responsible for releasing Will Rock on the world but it's a very easy sin to forgive. No other publisher pushed the boundaries of gaming nearly as much as Ubi Soft in 2003 - and 2004 looks to be no different. It's only a few short months until Far Cry.



2 Electronic Arts

More than anything, EA deserves its award simply for their steady output of games. Most publishers slow down throughout the year, releasing games only at peak times - not EA. Every month nearly without fail a new EA title will appear on shelves. They do deserve a sound spanking however for their criminal negligence of the brilliant Tron 2.0.



3 Take 2

Not too long ago magazines dreaded getting games from Take 2 because you could guarantee that every package would contain at least one shite European adventure game. No longer. Something happened. Now Take 2 is responsible for the GTA franchise, Max Payne, Hidden & Dangerous and some other high profile titles. Our little boy has grown up.



Best Developer

1 Infinity Ward

Medal of Honor: Allied Assault was just about the most critically acclaimed FPS ever until the team responsible one upped themselves with a little gem called Call of Duty. Take the tension of MoH: AA, turn it up to 11 and then have the whole thing run using the best looking Quake 3 based engine ever and you have a semi-accurate idea of their work. Add to the mix tight AI, brilliant level design and a hugely compelling campaign and you have the best development team of the year.



2 Ubi Soft Montreal

Not content to simply be a publisher par excellence, Ubi Soft Montreal is also an absolutely powerhouse developer in their own right. Whilst Ubi Soft had more than a handful of critically acclaimed games in 2003, the fact that three of them, Prince of Persia, Raven Shield and Splinter Cell all come from their Montreal Studio bodes well for the developer's future.



3 Trauma Studios

If the guys from Trauma don't become famous real soon we here at PCPP will be really surprised. You may not recognise the name but chances are you've seen or at least heard of their work. Trauma is responsible for the work in progress that is the BF 1942 mod, Desert Combat, a mod that is already more polished than half the games on the market. The fact that they're doing it all for free makes them even more impressive.



Asher Moses

TOP 3

1. Call of Duty - Without a doubt the best WWII shooter since MOH:AA.
2. Star Wars: KOTOR
3. Max Payne 2
4. GTA: Vice City
5. Counter-Strike 1.6

Best Game

1 Call of Duty

There is only one criticism you can level at Call of Duty and that is that the game is too short, but then again most of you will agree that short and sweet far outweighs long and boring and CoD is far from boring. As stated earlier, Call of Duty is everything MoH: AA promised to be, only more so. When MoH: AA was released, critics worldwide praised the tension of the level design, singling out Omaha Beach as a special example. Take Omaha Beach, times the tension by 10 and you have a rough gauge of the experience of playing what is doubtlessly the best WWII based shooter available. Hell, it's flat out one of the best shooters available period. Aside from the level design, Call of Duty features excellent AI, great mission design that neatly breaks up the action, awesome sound, three distinctly flavoured campaigns, and vehicle based missions all wrapped up in what a professional wrestler might call the total package. Although not as comprehensive as some of the multiplayer shooters currently on the market, Call of Duty also contains compelling and stable multiplayer. With net-code based on the tried and true Quake 3 engine, it's little wonder.



2 Equal 2nd GTA: Vice City

Votes were tied between the ultimate 80s experience and Knights of the Old Republic. Each is as different as chalk and cheese but both are prime examples of great game design and compelling mechanics. Take the hugely popular GTA 3 formula, transpose the action to the greatest of all decades, the 1980s, put together the most comprehensive period soundtrack ever seen in a game and overlay a typically grimy yet neon soaked 80s drug tale and you have a trip into wonderfully freeform gaming. If you get bored with the missions there's always a huge city to explore, cars to steal and crazy stunts to perform.

2 Equal 2nd Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic

Long have games awaited the seemingly mythical Star Wars RPG and even longer they've been awaiting the definitive Star Wars game. Bioware's latest RPG opus is both, seamlessly integrating compelling real-time/turn-based action, authentic Star Wars seasoning and a great looking engine to create something far better than anything Mr. Beardsy seems to be able to come up with between merchandising meetings. It's also got one of the best RPG hooks seen since Planescape: Torment. What more could you want from the first RPG to come from the most beloved science fiction movies of all time?



4 Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

If only all sequels and remakes were this good we wouldn't have to dread Lara Croft's next appearance. All developers of third person action games should take note of PoP - this is how to make a game. Devilishly brilliant jumping puzzles, fun and accessible combat, breathtaking animations and the best use of a bullet-time esque gimmick yet seen in a game. Buy it. Love it. Pimp it to a friend.



5 Command and Conquer Generals

Whilst Generals may not have added much new to the RTS genre it did inject a fresh dose of fun into a community still obsessively playing Starcraft. The single player AI may still be a bit dumb for some RTS aficionados but great unit and side balance make for fast and furious multiplayer.

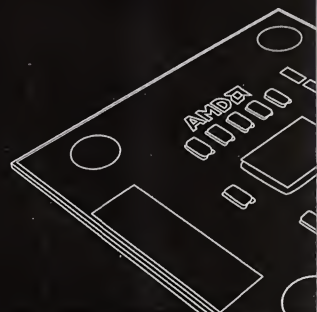
George Soronos

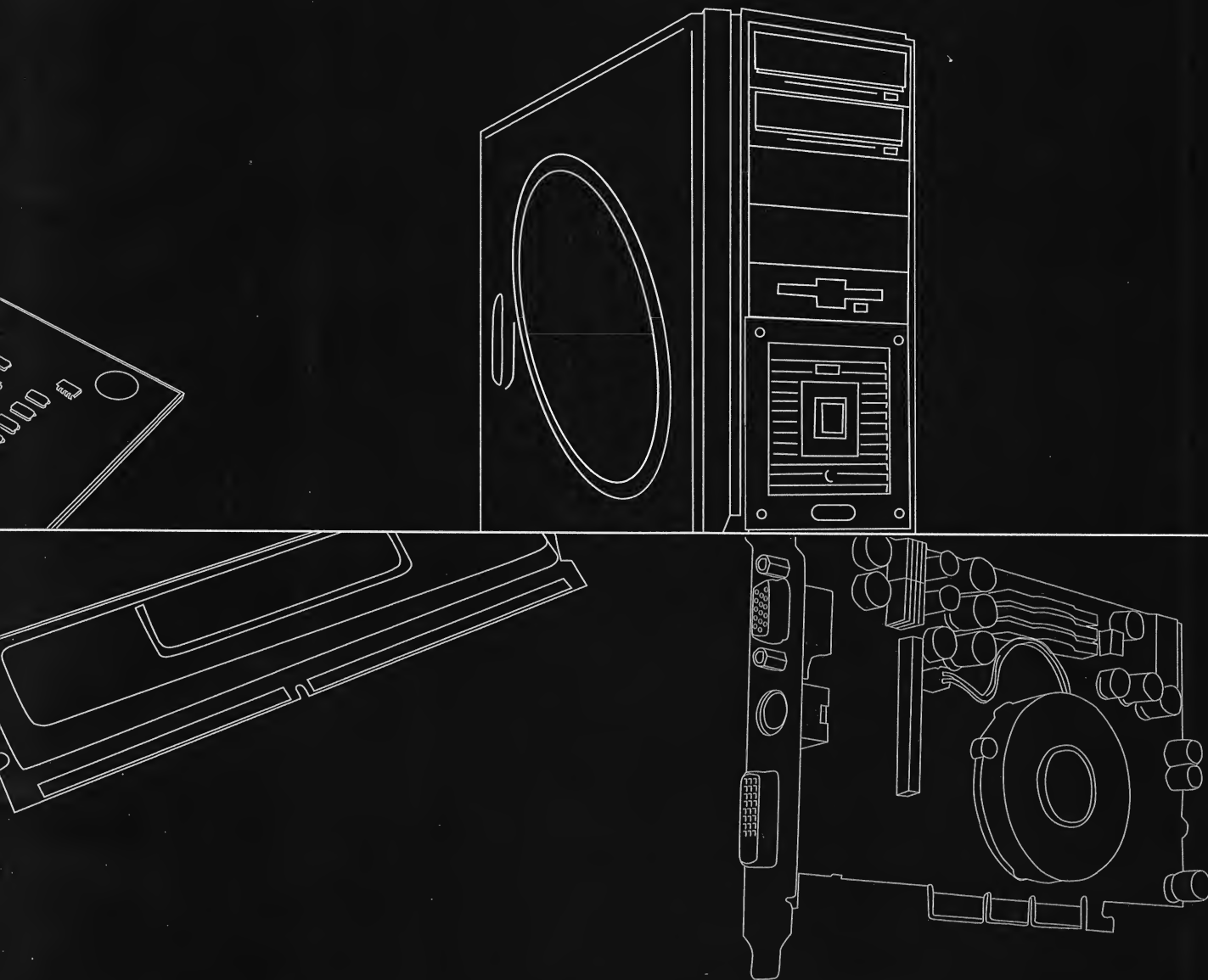
TOP 5

1. Vietcong - One of the best objective based FPSs I've ever played. Unfortunately you need a grunty PC to play it smoothly but it's well worth the investment.
2. Call of Duty
3. Live For Speed
4. Homeworld 2
5. IL2 Sturmovik

2004

A TECHNOLOGY ODYSSEY

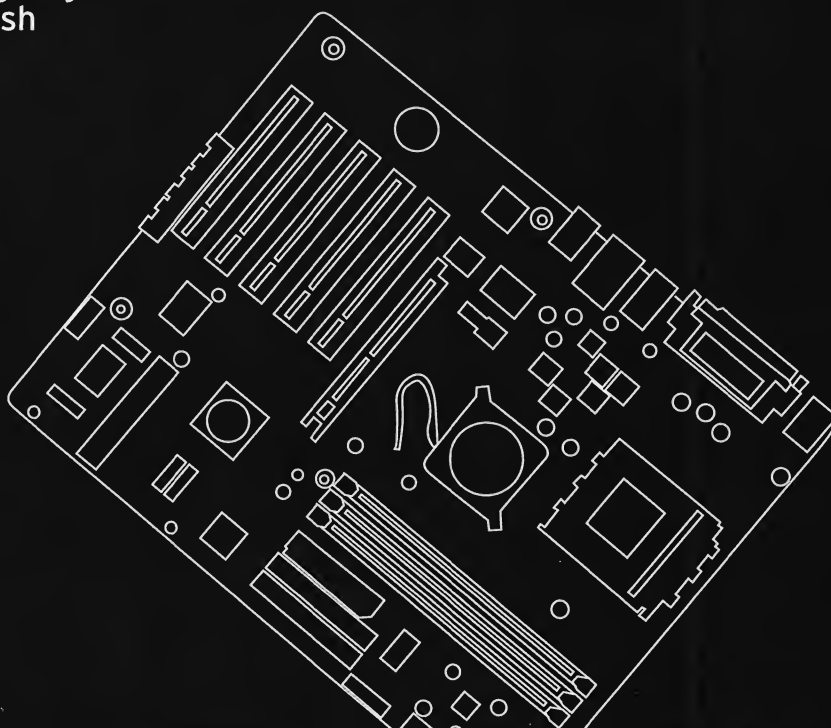


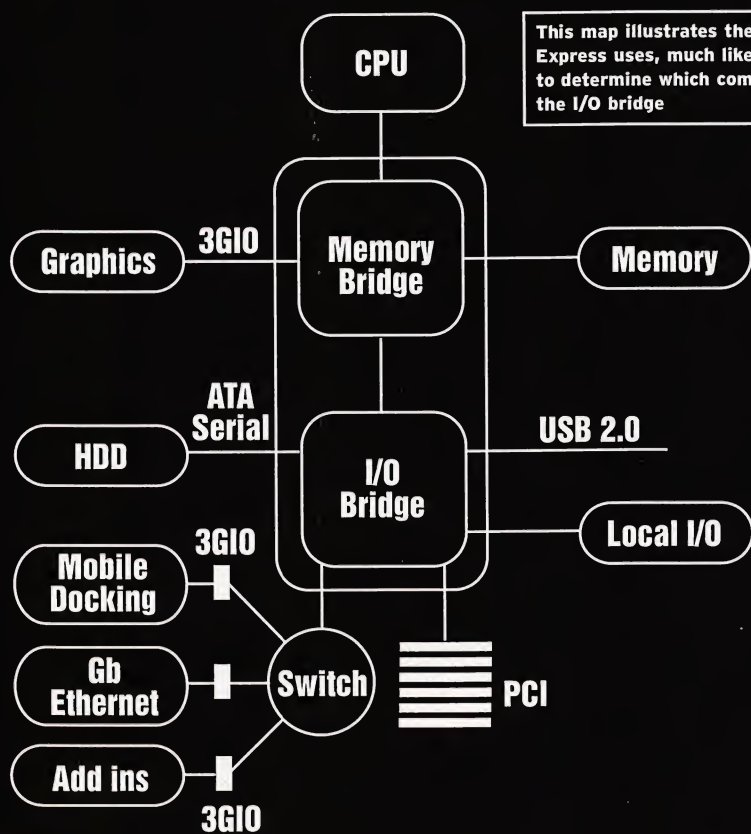


It's going to be a big year for new PC components. **Bennett Ring** gazes into his silicon ball to see where you're going to be spending your hard earned cash over the coming year.

Let's be honest. Apart from the release of AMD's Athlon 64, the year 2003 wasn't exactly a hive of hardware release activity. In fact, it was arguably one of the most boring years for tech that we've had in recent memory. No Y2K bugs to prompt the futile spending of billions of dollars on non-existent problems; case modding became so mainstream that it's now become cool to have an unaltered, stock case; and as per usual there wasn't any sign of my holy grail of gaming, Virtual Reality.

Possibly the most interesting battle of the year occurred between NVIDIA and ATI, with ATI finally gaining widespread acceptance as the leader of the pixel pushing pack. Well, unless you happened to be a Chinese web site or publication, in which case NVIDIA is still the king, as every second email sent to me by NVIDIA attests.





As far as memory was concerned, things were pretty damn uninspiring as well, although DDR-RAM firmly entrenched itself as the memory format of choice. Our well worn SD-RAM became harder to find than Osama Bin Laden, but we weren't too fazed that supplies of overpriced RD-RAM also started to dry up faster than a drop of red wine being soaked up by a sanitary napkin.

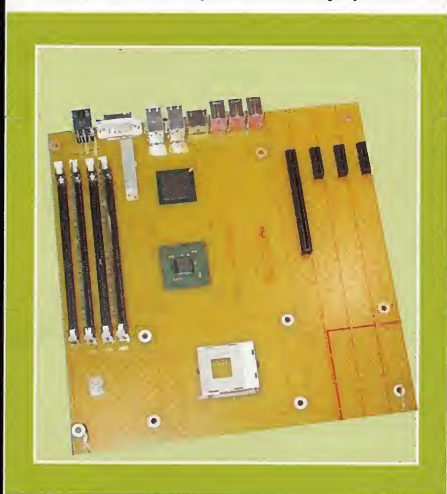
The biggest news in motherboard land was the introduction of the 865 and 875P chipsets from Intel, which stirred up a nice little mess when mobo manufacturers started enabling PAT-like (Performance Acceleration Technology) on the 865 boards - a feature that Intel was using to separate the higher priced 875P from the 865 series. Despite threats from Intel to revamp the 865 silicon to make these tweaks impossible, we're still seeing 865 boards that can outperform the 875P, which hasn't made 875P owners an overly happy bunch. Wouldn't you know it, I'm one of them.

Serial ATA finally arrived after several years of hype, and the performance difference between it and our standard parallel ATA was somewhere between jack and shit. Wow, thin cables! Well worth splashing out a few hundred bucks for... not. At least now that the initial generation of SATA has landed we can get on to the next generation, which promises much more impressive performance gains.

Thankfully things are about to get a whole lot more interesting in 2004, with more than enough new tech to make up for last year's dearth of good stuff. On the way are new CPUs, new motherboard types, totally new video card chipsets (not just refresher products) and a new type of memory to keep us all digging deep into our pockets.

As a result of all this new gear, we recommend holding off on any hardware purchasing decisions until April at the very least, unless you're a collector who enjoys purchasing products that are teetering on the verge of the chasm of obsolescence. However, the flip side of this

An early reference board for PCI Express. Those tiny slots on the right are 1X slots, the bigger slot being the 16X for graphics.



argument is that you might not want to buy into the first generation of these brand new technologies, as the first generation of a product is notorious for being bug ridden and lacking in performance increases. Not to mention bloody expensive. This means that you might be better off holding off on major hardware purchases until the end of 2004, when all the bugs and quirks of the first generation have been ironed out, and they've also become much more affordable.

Now that we've thoroughly confused you about when to bite the bullet and upgrade, let's check out the gear that you'll be blowing all your rent money on this year.

Your mother wouldn't like it

If there is one piece of technology that is going to be big this year, it's PCI Express. After speaking to several vendors at last year's Computex, one of the key reasons for introducing this new interface is not to increase performance, nor to make system building a simpler process. It's all about upgrading. You see, once PCI Express has established itself, all your old PCI and AGP cards are going to be obsolete, as well as any motherboards that aren't based around PCI Express. As a result this should drive consumers to purchase new hardware. Pretty cynical view of the tech, isn't it? However, there are

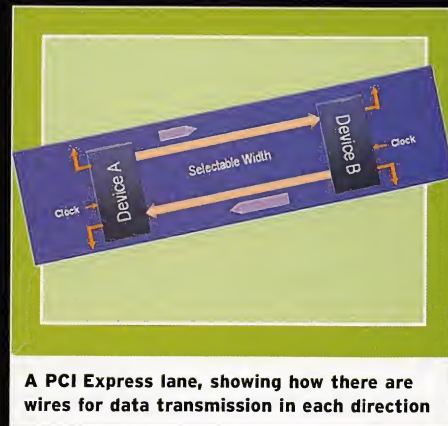
If there is one piece of technology that is going to be big this year, it's PCI Express.

definite advantages to this new technology, other than the fact that we'll be making the CEOs of the world's biggest IT vendors even richer than they are already.

PCI is getting old. Twelve years old to be precise. In case you've never opened a PC case before, PCI is the standard I/O interconnect option for add in cards, and it hasn't changed a great deal since its introduction in 1992. And it's just not keeping up with the demands that we're now placing on it, with things such as ATA-133 hard drives, Gigabit Ethernet and RAID controllers all able to overwhelm the limited bandwidth provided by the PCI bus.

PCI uses a parallel bus implementation, meaning that it sends and receives data over the same connection, with each PCI slot having 32 of these connections (each of which requires a trace route on your motherboard). However, just as hard drives are moving to a serial interface (meaning that data is only sent one way over each connection) with the Serial ATA interface, PCI Express moves PCI to a connection that is serial in nature. But how could a one way connection be faster than one that can both send and receive?

It's all about the speed at which the data is transmitted. PCI has 32 of these parallel signals, which shunt your ones and zeroes around at 33MHz. If this frequency is increased, a problem known as signal skew versus clocking occurs, and this makes it very costly to improve the throughput of the PCI bus. As a result, today's standard 33MHz PCI slots only have 1Gbps



(Gigabit per second) of bandwidth to play with.

PCI Express uses a rather different model for sending data to your add-in cards. Instead of 32 parallel signals, PCI Express uses two differentially signalled half duplex wires running at a mind blowing 2.5Gbps, offering double the bandwidth of a PCI slot. These two wires are known as a 'lane'. A result of this is a lowering of the pin count needed for each PCI Express slot,

and you'll see from our images that the PCI Express slot is much smaller than a PCI slot. It also utilises a new form of sending the data that encodes clock and data information into a single stream, allowing an increase in signal speed while lowering the number of necessary signals. It's also very cheap to make, requiring eight times less trace lanes on the motherboard for each PCI Express slot compared to PCI, so this shouldn't result in PCI Express motherboards having a higher cost than the PCI based boards of today.

To increase the speed of a PCI Express port, it's a simple matter of increasing the link widths (number of lanes) between the PCI Express slot and the I/O hub, with a maximum projected link performance of a whopping 80Gbps. Signalling rate increases can also be utilised to increase the available bandwidth.

The standard PCI Express port will be a simple one lane solution, known as 1X, but this isn't fast enough to cope with the hefty demands placed upon your system by the graphics card. Enter the 16X PCI Express port, which utilises 16 of these lanes to increase the bandwidth available to the PCI Express port. So as well as replacing your PCI slots, PCI Express will be replacing the AGP port. Yes, that shiny new 8X AGP GeForce FX 5950 you just purchased is soon to be rendered obsolete.

While today's 8X AGP slots have a theoretical maximum bandwidth of 2.1GB/sec, the new 16X PCI Express slot doubles this to have a theoretical bidirectional peak bandwidth of 4GB/sec.

Concurrent data bandwidth reaches a maximum of 8GB/sec, and there is still plenty of room to increase this in the future.

As a result, your video card is going to have access to the rest of your components, and more importantly the system memory and processor, faster than ever before. However, after being thoroughly underwhelmed each time a new flavour of AGP came out (the difference in real world performance between AGP 4X and AGP 8X was in most cases less than a couple of percent), we're very sceptical about whether or not this is going to make much of a difference. There's a reason that the amount of onboard memory on video cards continues to grow, and that's because for heavy duty, high frame rate rendering it's much quicker to fetch and store data onboard the video card within its own dedicated memory, rather than wait around while retrieving it from your system memory. Despite our doubts, ATI were quick to reassure us that there is a significant increase in performance between AGP and PCI Express cards. But they would say that, wouldn't they? Only a thorough benchmarking session in the labs will be able to prove or disprove whether or not PCI Express is the holy

these work (in the case of the CSA, you'll see a doubling of Gigabit Ethernet performance when compared to a Gigabit Ethernet adaptor mounted on the PCI bus), but they're not a cheap solution. Thankfully PCI Express's 1X speed of 2.5Gbps is more than enough to handle a full duplex Gigabit Ethernet connection. In layman's terms, copying over Deep Throat #6 from a mate's computer will be faster than ever before, even if you're already running a Gigabit Ethernet LAN (but aren't using motherboards with Intel's CSA or other comparable solutions).

The move to PCI Express for graphics also delivers new power requirements. No longer will your video card have a separate 5V power supply; instead a very clean supply over the +12V line is required. Video cards that require 60W of power or more in total will also need a special cooling fan aimed directly at the 16X PCI Express slot, so we're rather interested to see how motherboard and case manufacturers are going to implement this. Hopefully it won't result in noisier PCs, as the airflow necessary isn't likely to rival that of NASA's wind tunnels.

While we doubt we're going to see much of a performance increase purely as a result of the

that this comment is yet another of Bennett's crappy jokes).

In fact, we should start to see the Socket 939 platform (motherboard and CPU) hitting the scene around quarter 2 (March) for both the Athlon 64 and the Athlon FX. Both of these new Socket 939 processors, respectively codenamed Winchester and San Diego, will be built using AMD's snazzy new SOI (Silicon On Insulator) technique, and they'll also be built on a 0.09 micron process. Here's hoping they have better luck with the move to a smaller fabrication process than it appears Intel has had with its Prescott.

So what about all you existing Socket 754 (current Athlon 64) and Socket 940 (current Athlon FX) owners? Too bad, so sad, but it looks like your lovely new platform is going to have no upgrade path by the end of the 2004, for which you can thank AMD's total lack of information. From what we can gather, the final Athlon 64 to be offered in the Socket 754 form will be the Athlon 64 3700+, which isn't a heck of a lot faster than the existing Athlon 64s.

The news isn't all bad though, as the move to the Socket 939 platform should bring about a nice 5% to 10% performance increase for the Athlon 64 thanks to its inclusion of dual channel memory support. The FX series should also get a nice little performance boost, as the Socket 940 boards currently used by these processors aren't really optimised for gaming performance. We can also expect lower end versions of the Athlon 64 to show up in 2004, sporting half the cache of the 1MB L2 cache Athlons, at 512k.

As far as frequencies go, don't expect the Athlon 64 to hit speeds much higher than 2.4GHz in 2004, which equates to a performance rating of approximately 4000+. Could it be that as our CPU frequencies increase, the added complexity of CPU designs are causing Moore's Law to slow down? A 20% increase in performance over 12 months isn't anywhere near the doubling every 18 months that we've gotten used to.

AMD aren't the only ones who are holding back information regarding their products for the year 2004, as Intel are playing a very similar, very tight-lipped game. However, we think it's for a very different reason than AMD. While AMD seem to be withholding this information to protect sales of its existing platforms, it appears that Intel simply doesn't know what the year has in store for the company. This is due to the problems that Intel has encountered with the latest iteration of the Pentium 4, currently codenamed Prescott. Originally slated to be released in late 2003, it appears that Intel has run into a few hiccups with this chip - it's not as if they could hold back the CPU due to a lack of competition, as the Athlon 64 has been a resounding PR success for AMD.

If you're expecting Prescott to be a radically redesigned CPU with a brand new architecture, think again. It still uses the basic Pentium 4 design, and for good reason, as this architecture was specifically designed to scale to 10GHz. Expect the Prescott to scale to around 4GHz by the end of the year; again, this isn't as fast as users could expect based on Moore's Law. Maybe Moore's theory should be relabelled Moore's Obsolete Law?

the Socket 754 platform is destined to fade away into nothingness by the end of 2004

grail of graphics card interconnections that the vendors behind PCI Express are claiming it to be.

One area that will definitely see a performance increase is Gigabit Ethernet. When running on today's PCI motherboards, this networking connection is simply too fast for the PCI bus, (as the bus only offers 1 Gigabit per second, and a duplex Gigabit Ethernet connection can theoretically hit 2 Gigabits per second) and as a result the PCI bus floods faster than an Indonesian fishing village hit by a typhoon. To get around this, companies have had to use expensive proprietary chips to link the Gigabit Ethernet port to the system, such as Intel's CSA (Communications Streaming Architecture). Sure,

move to PCI Express (with the exception of Gigabit Ethernet and add on RAID controllers), the main bonus is PCI Express's ability to scale to higher bandwidths in the future. You can expect PCI Express motherboards to start hitting shelves in late March/early April (with Intel and ATI most likely to have the first products on show), and initial boards should have a combination of both PCI and PCI Express. However, if a board uses PCI Express it most likely will not have an AGP port, so you'll also need to upgrade your video card, although it's rumoured that certain chipset manufacturers are trying to find a way around this problem.

Brawny Brains

It's amazing how selective the CPU manufacturers can be when it comes to releasing information about their upcoming products. For example, in the past AMD were renowned for letting gamers know how long they could expect their existing platforms to remain in use, before being tossed into the realm of obsolescence by a new socket/chipset release. However, since the release of the Athlon 64, it's become nigh on impossible to get any verification about when the shift to the next socket is going to happen, which can only mean one thing. It's going to be sooner than later. But AMD don't want you to know about this in case it hurts sales of their existing platforms.

However, after much net trawling and rumour hunting, we've found out that the Socket 754 platform is destined to fade away into nothingness by the end of 2004, giving all existing Athlon 64 owners a great reason to firebomb AMD HQ (Ed - our legal team would like to make it quite clear





This chip will initially ship at 3.4GHz, and will be recognisable by the addition of an E to the end of the chip name, so keep your eyes peeled for a 3.40E. It's estimated that Prescott can ramp up to 5GHz, so we can't wait to get our hands on a sample to see how it's going to overclock. Maybe LO:MAC will finally run at a constant 30fps on a machine containing one of these overclocked babies!

While it's not a brand new architecture, the Prescott does bring a few changes to the Pentium 4 table. Most obvious of these is the move to a 0.09 micron manufacturing process, and it's this move that is rumoured to be the cause of the delays in releasing the chip. Early pre-production samples seemed to have major heat problems, and many speculated that the launch Prescott would pump out over 100W. However, recently released Intel documentation suggests that the maximum thermal output should be significantly lower, at somewhere between 86W and 93W. When you

consider that today's 0.13 micron 3.2GHz Pentium 4 pumps out approximately 105W, we can see that the Prescott is a significantly cooler processor. As a result of this move to a lower fabrication size, the necessary voltage has also been dropped, to around 1.2V or 1.3V, depending on the frequency of the CPU.

This move to a smaller manufacturing process has been necessary to help the architecture scale in frequency, but there are also several other changes which should help performance levels. The biggest of these is the doubling of the L2 cache (the Speedy Gonzales style memory which is built into the CPU), up to a hefty 1MB brings it up to par with current Athlon 64s. As a result the transistor count within the CPU has skyrocketed to 178 million, which is quite amazing considering these are all squeezed into an area that is only 237 mm². L1 cache has also doubled, from 8k to 16k.

A feature that won't be utilised until software is tweaked to support it is the inclusion of SSE3, which includes 13 new instructions. These new instructions are tasked with floating point to integer conversions, complex arithmetic procedures, video encoding, and thread synchronisation (which should result in even better HyperThreading performance), amongst other duties.

We're expecting a performance increase from between 5% to 10% when comparing the Prescott to the previous generation of Pentium 4s, when both are running at the same frequency, as a result of these changes to the architecture.

The question that is on every Intel lovers lips is whether or not their motherboard will be compatible with the new Prescott, and the answer is maybe. If you're running a motherboard based on the 865PE or 875P chipset, then things are looking good. Sort of. You see, it's most likely that your chipset is compatible with the Prescott, but the problem lies in your motherboard's ability to supply the correct voltage to the CPU. Basically, if your motherboard manufacturer was forward looking enough to follow the Intel P4 Prescott FMB 1.5 or 2.0 qualification, as well as VRM 10.0 (Voltage Regulation Module), you should be able to run Prescott without a problem. Unfortunately not every motherboard manufacturer followed these qualifications when building 865PE and 875P based mobos. Boards from the high end, enthusiast level manufacturers such as ASUS, Abit, Gigabyte and MSI *should* be compatible with the Prescott. Those boards from the lower end are expected to be the ones with issues, but a quick email to the relevant company listing your motherboard model and revision should give you an answer.

We can also expect a new socket design out of Intel around March of this year, in the form of

Socket 775 chips and supporting chipsets. The two new chipsets due from Intel are Grantsdale (successor to the 865 series) and Alderwood (successor to the 875P), both of which support PCI Express and DDR-II memory. The new socket is an LGA (Land Grid Array) type, which means your CPU won't have the pins that are commonplace on today's CPUs. So, now you have yet another reason to hold off on your hardware purchase until April of this year.

Eye Candy

This year should see the entry of a new player to the graphics market, XGI. Formed when SIS spun off its graphic department Xabre, XGI then paid vast amounts of cash to acquire Trident's graphics subsidiary. So XGI is really just the combined graphical might of both SIS and Trident



DDR-II in all its glory. Pity it won't run in your DDR-SDRAM board.

this product promises to deliver performance twice as fast as the RADEON 9800XT

— now why doesn't that excite me? Could it be because both of these companies have a reputation for creating graphics products that are about as powerful as the chips found in the Game Boy Advance? Regardless, XGI are claiming that their first high end product, the Duo V8 Volari (which utilises two separate GPUs on a single board) will perform approximately as fast as the RADEON 9800. Unfortunately there are two problems with this claim; for starters, when you see what ATI has in store for March of this year, a RADEON 9800 won't seem that fast anymore. Secondly, early benchmarks for this card are showing up on the Net already, and it appears that for many tasks the Duo V8 Volari is nowhere near as fast as a RADEON 9800, making it obsolete before it's even released. However, it must be remembered that these are benchmarks of preproduction boards using prototype drivers, so there's still hope that the board will deliver as

promised. But we wouldn't bet the house on it, even if it's your kid sister's Barbie Beach Vacation House™ that we're talking about. XGI also have several mainstream and low end chipsets on the way, but they're all basically slower versions of the chip used in the Duo V8 Volari.

The big news from both NVIDIA and ATI is the introduction of PCI Express video cards, and both companies swear that this new interface will make a performance difference when compared to AGP 8X. Which is also what they said about the move from AGP 4X to 8X, so take this comment with a grain of salt. What isn't in dispute is that the graphics chipsets they'll be employing on these boards promise to make the GeForce FX 5950 and RADEON 9800XT look positively average.

Unfortunately information on both NVIDIA's and ATI's upcoming products is exceptionally scarce. The big one to look out for from ATI is currently known as the PCI Express compatible R423, and this product promises to deliver performance at least twice as fast as the RADEON 9800XT, and like most of the big products of 2004 is due to hit the market in March or April. Those of you who aren't willing to splash out on a new PCI Express motherboard simply to be able to run the R423 will be happy to hear that an AGP 8X version is also on the way, currently known as the R420, and this should perform around the same level as the R423. Taking care of the mainstream market will be the R380, RV380, R370 and RV370 chipsets, but the performance levels of these different chipsets are currently unknown, although at a recent meeting with ATI they let it slip that the R380 should perform faster than the 9800XT — not bad for a \$400 graphics card.

2003 was a very bad year for NVIDIA, whether they'd like to admit it or not, so 2004 could turn out to be make or break time for this fallen king of graphics. Sadly information regarding its upcoming products is even harder to find than ATI's. The only information that we could scrounge up was the codename NV40, which will become the next high end part from

NVIDIA. Like the new ATI high end card, performance for this chipset is rumoured to be approximately twice as fast as the current generation of GeForce FX 5950s. NVIDIA also has the NV41 and NV43 chipsets lined up to take care of the mainstream and budget sectors, but we've got zero information regarding their expected performance.

That's about all of the information that we could find about the graphics card arena in 2004, but it's enough to know that any purchasing decision made before March or April will be a bad one.

Thanks for the memories

Just when you thought 2004 couldn't contain any more new PC component technology, along comes a new type of memory, making those two sticks of PC4000 that you just blew a grand on look like rather expensive, not to mention ineffective, letter openers. Yup, it looks like DDR-II is finally going to land.

Unfortunately this new memory format is not backwards compatible with DDR-SDRAM, and the benefits over existing DDR memory aren't exactly clear cut. DDR-II is built very similarly to DDR-SDRAM, but the key difference lies in its ability to fetch 4 bits of data per clock, compared to 2 bits on DDR-SDRAM, which theoretically doubles the data. But this brings with it a unique set of problems, the foremost being increased latency and additional temperature. While we're sure that most of you don't give a damn if your case interior gets a little warmer than it is now, the increased latency problem is more worrying. Unfortunately we're not going to be able to say just how much of a problem this will be until we get our hands on some DDR-II and give it a whipping in our test benches. It's very surprising to note that DDR-II uses much less voltage than DDR-SDRAM, at 1.8V compared to DDR's 2.5V-2.75V, yet still runs a darn sight hotter.

The biggest benefit of DDR-SDRAM probably won't even be noticed by consumers, and that is its ability to be manufactured at a lower cost than DDR-SDRAM. Hopefully this will result in lower prices for consumers, but we wouldn't hold our breath for a sudden price drop, especially considering the low cost of memory at the moment.

Whether or not to purchase DDR-II memory is a tricky question, as this is the biggest unknown of the year 2004 in terms of performance; it'll just have to be a case of wait and see.

Put your wallet away

As you can see, 2004 is shaping up to be one helluva big year for component releases. We've got new CPUs, new I/O interfaces (resulting in new motherboards), totally new GPU (graphics processing unit) architectures and a new memory format to keep us busy.

As a result, to buy new components in the first quarter of 2004 you'd have to either be a total idiot or one seriously cashed up buyer. By the beginning of the second half of the year we should have a clear indication of which of these products are winners, and which are RD-RAMmers. Rest assured that PC PowerPlay will be testing the living bejesus out of these products, so stay tuned to find out which ones actually live up to the hype.

RUMOURS, GOSSIP AND SPECULATION

Whenever a hardware vendor releases a new product, we're literally engulfed by press releases, product sheets and tech specs about the product. However, getting detailed information out of the same company about future products is about as difficult as finding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. So the majority of the information within this article has been scrounged off various web sites, news groups and via the use of tea leaf reading. As a result, don't blame us if some of it doesn't come true. But we've strived to verify each prediction by checking with a variety of sources, so we're confident that the vast majority of what you're reading is indeed going to happen.

GAMES IN REVIEW

So, Deus Ex: Invisible War, eh? PC PowerPlay is confident in its opinions. We have a team of experienced, dedicated and reliable reviewers. Sometimes our reviews go against the consensus, however. Invisible War is one of those occasions. We love it for the very same reasons we loved Deus Ex. And if few others agree with us, I'm comfortable in saying - quite frankly - they're wrong. It's been bewildering, frustrating and often hilarious observing the "reviews" on the Interweb's various game sites and forums. Read Anthony's review across the page and I believe you'll find a fairly compelling case for the defence.

But enough about Deus Ex for now. I'd rather tell you about the other under-appreciated title we have in for review this issue. That is, Beyond Good & Evil. Unlike Invisible War, BG&E has garnered almost universal acclaim throughout the specialist press, so it's certainly not under-appreciated in that sense. Yet it has completely failed to impress itself upon the game-buying public, not just in Australia but all across the globe. Even in its console incarnations - where you might assume its intended audience is waiting - it has been found wanting at retail.

Why this is the case perhaps isn't a mystery. In an age where only contemporary, real world scenarios (think Vice City, The Sims, Need for Speed or any military shooter), big licenses (Harry Potter, Lord of the Rings) or officially endorsed sports titles (Rugby League, FIFA, Tony Hawk) actually shift a great volume of



units, it's obvious that Ubisoft's very European, sci-fi/fantasy-flavoured cinematic adventure would struggle for attention. The massmarket gamer wants to be able to identify with something they can relate to, whether that's driving a hotted up car or playing as the Sydney Roosters. Some cute French photojournalist and her wise-cracking pig buddy aren't really going to cut it no matter how beautifully designed the game or well-developed the characters.

Which is a tragedy. If you don't buy Invisible War this month, make

sure you get Beyond Good & Evil - you won't regret it.

David Wildgoose
Editor

- 55 Deus Ex: Invisible War
- 58 Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon
- 60 Beyond Good & Evil
- 62 Storm Angel
- 63 Cricket 2004
- 64 UFO Aftermath
- 65 Horizons

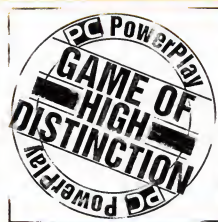
GOLD AWARD



The ultimate accolade. A game that receives a Gold Award is an essential purchase, and the only excuse for not owning it is either not having a powerful enough PC, or not having a PC at all. Or arms. It represents a new direction in gaming, a new benchmark against which all others will be measured. It defines its genre, or creates a new one. It is gaming. You must own it.

90+

HIGH DISTINCTION



This is the finest in gaming. A fresh concept, a perfect execution, a meaningful extension to a tried and tested format, one or all of these are required for this score. We strongly recommend the purchase of each High Distinction game, but extremely fussy gamers may want to skip those HD games that don't also receive Gold Awards.

85-100

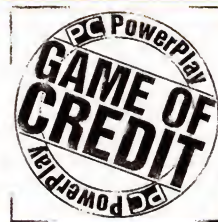
DISTINCTION



An intriguing new concept or a bold new direction that manages to pull its new trick off with a reasonable degree of flair. You will be impressed, at either the graphics, the gameplay or some other new element that you may not have encountered before. Or perhaps this is a familiar gaming concept, but one executed so well it's almost - but not quite - an essential purchase.

75-84

CREDIT



Solid, playable, largely bug-free, entertaining and maybe even a bit unexpected, these are the hallmarks of a game of Credit. You may have seen it all before, but you won't mind, because a Credit game does what it says on the box - it plays well and it keeps you hooked. An essential purchase? Not necessarily, but worth consideration.

65-74

PASS



A game that receives a pass is playable, but its concept may be flawed, its extras may be lacking or its graphical enhancements may have fallen off somewhere in a lengthy bug-fixing process. And bugs there may be, although in the end the game will, as we say, work. Purchase if you're curious, but discerning gamers will probably look for something more substantial.

50-64

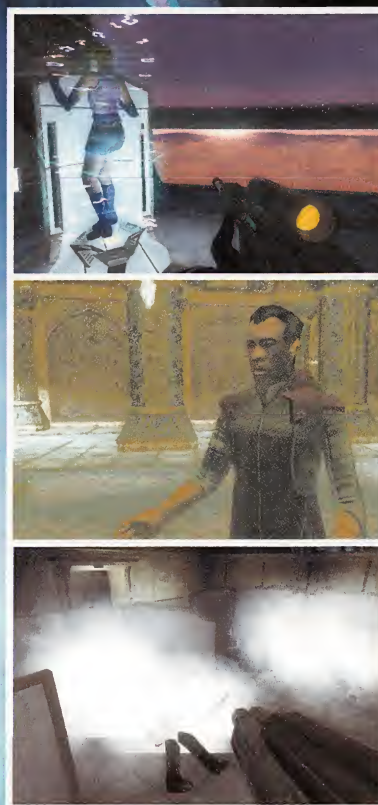
FAIL



There are more than 5000 games released each year. Some are gems. Some are merely unremarkable. Others are nothing more than a shameless grab for cash. Graphics will be rudimentary and gameplay will be worse. If you see someone considering a game that has failed, gently take them by the elbow and hurl them out of the shop. It's your duty as a good citizen.

0-49

Hmm... he looks strangely familiar...



Deus Ex: Invisible War

It's all a conspiracy I tells ya!

Developer: Ion Storm ■ Publisher: Atari ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: MA15+ ■ Available: March

Let me begin by giving you a big fat warning: this review contains spoilers. I'm sorry, but since the amazing revelations about what happens during DX2 start five minutes into the game, it's simply impossible to talk about it in any meaningful way without giving away at least a few of the secrets.

However, I can reassure you by saying that DX2 has so many secrets and twists that even if I listed out half a dozen of them right now there'd still be plenty more to discover. In fact, in some ways this is what's wrong with the game - DX2 is, like its predecessor, a conspiracy nut's wet dream with guns, but unlike DX1 it packs a similar number of shocking denouements into a game a little less than half the size.

Short n' Sweet

Invisible War is not a long game. It's in keeping with most of what you'll see on the shelves these days - if you play in normal mode you'll have the whole thing bowled over in a little less than ten hours. So don't expect what the original gave us - an RPG-length romp in FPS form.

Here's the cute metaphor - if Deus Ex was the gaming equivalent of the Lord of the Rings book, then Invisible War is the equivalent of the blockbuster Hollywood

CLAUSTROPHOBIA

The Unreal Warfare engine is a pretty thing indeed, there's no doubt of that, and Ion Storm's modifications have resulted in a damn smart looking game. Unfortunately, they've had to sacrifice two important things - the size of each location and the number of locations. Even streetscapes are cramped, with only a tiny slice of sky visible. There are only a couple of 'arena' style levels, and they are much smaller than in DX1. Even familiar levels from the first game have had to be split in two for the second. To add insult to injury, the levels in DX2 also have less stuff in them - fewer secret weapons caches and fewer subplots. And the loading times! Don't get me started!

trilogy films of the book. It's more spectacular, potentially more engaging, has brighter colours but is considerably more brief and doesn't give you that massive sense of achievement that finally ploughing through the original gave.

And yet this is not necessarily a wholly negative thing. Here's another cute metaphor - the hardest thing for a

newly forged soccer team to learn is to pass BACKWARDS to their own defensive line. Ion Storm has learnt from DX1 that everything they included in the game was not necessarily good, even though it worked.

The classic example is lockpicks and multitools. It's easy to see that these are essentially the same device - and what's the deal with a tool that can hack electronically into a variety of devices but can't open locks? Therefore, lockpicks and multitools have been combined in DX2.

Guns n' Butter

Something more contentious is ammo. In the new game, there is only one type of ammo, for guns as varied as the mag rail and the flamethrower. A quick bit of sci-fi gibberish about nano particles self-assembling the required ammo explains the unified system, but the gameplay rationale is to give players access to their full arsenal of weapons all the time. Different weapons use different amounts of ammo, as do different weapon modes. This takes some getting used to but ultimately makes the game more streamlined - you don't have to spend hours running around levels just looking for ammo.

Ion Storm has also dispensed with

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-1GHz+
256MB RAM
64MB Video card
1.5GB HDD

WANT

P4-2GHz+
512MB RAM
Radeon 9700
1.5GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.ionstorm.com
Check out the forums. People hate this game. It's hilarious



Illuminati Elite Trooper: You will infiltrate the New Cairo arcology. I will do the same and join you prior to the assault.



XBOX VERSION?

Let me put your fears to rest. DX2 is not a console port. It's a PC game that also happens to have an Xbox release. A lot of the detractors seem to have forgotten that the Xbox basically IS a PC. DX2 has high-res textures, it has a plethora of controls, it works well with a keyboard but most importantly it's an intelligent game worthy of PC players.

SYSTEM REQS

DX2 is not kind to lower end systems. A combination of dynamic lights, another lighting effect called 'bloom' and the very complexity of its scripting language means you will need a fairly beefy machine to best enjoy it. On top of this, the game has been reported as having problems with a number of video cards at both the low and high end of the market. Make sure you head over to www.ionstorm.com and check out the latest news on the game's status.

some of the RPG elements from the original game. Personally, I liked skills points and specialising as a particular kind of agent, but it's easy to see that in reality this element of DX1 just slowed the player down and made earlier levels artificially more difficult. Now, advancement is done entirely through

biomod canister upgrades and weapon mods. It's more fluid, since the player can overwrite old biomods with new ones if they want to try using a different skill.

So that's the DX1 fans sorted - what's so great about Invisible War then for new players? One word: choice.

There is currently no other game in the market that gives such a well defined and effective set of choices to the player. DX2 is a shooter, but rather than just mindlessly following the orders of some disembodied voice in your head, the player must choose which faction of the game world they will support, often on the fly. The nature of the player character is such that all factions want the player's help all the time, even if the player has been helping that faction's enemy. You will frequently receive conflicting mission objectives - kill a scientist or interrogate him, surrender a sample of

your blood or kill the doctor etc - and how you choose to proceed will dramatically affect the game...

Crime n' Punishment

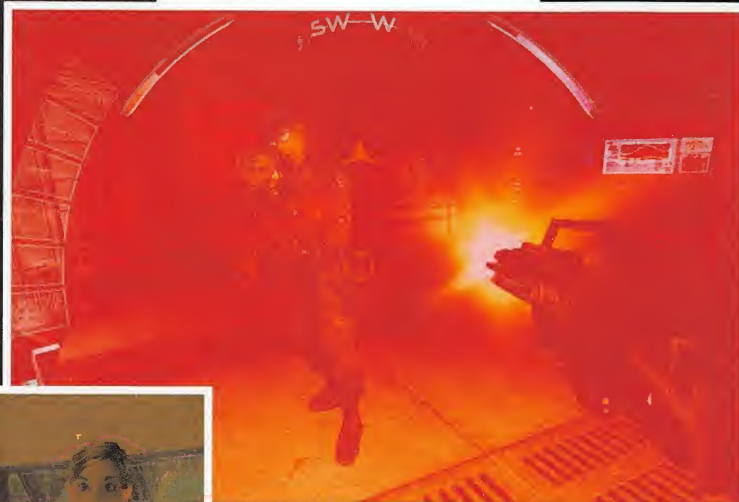
...or will it? Like DX1, there is a lot of clever narrative trickery in play here to make you THINK that your actions have had a profound effect when in reality only a few small things are different - defy the Templars in one incident for instance and a character will survive to help or hinder you at the end of the game, obey them and he won't appear. Significant perhaps, but hardly a completely divergent narrative stream.

So all this goes into the mix - real choices for the player, a leaner RPG element, and some slick graphics with the best use of dynamic lights yet seen on PC. What comes out the other end?

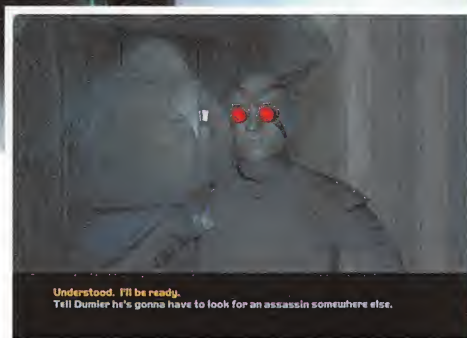
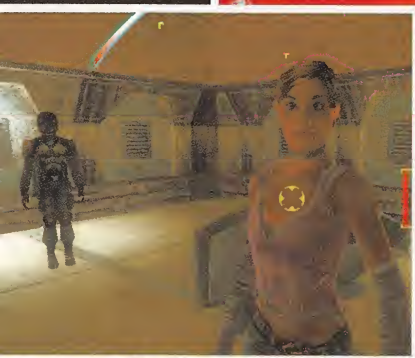
For this rabid Deus Ex fan, what came out was a game that was much better than anything else I'd played... except Deus Ex. Invisible War is a game that more than any other shows that you can have the best gameplay design in the world, but without brilliant writing you're always going to come off second best to your more primitive but better written predecessor.

Invisible War's characters are weak. They're all conspiracy nuts - they don't have real lives. They rant and rave about the evilness of their opposition but never actually say anything to support

Shooting off his nose to spite his faction.



Levels? Is this some sort of console game?



Understood. I'll be ready. Tell Dumier he's gonna have to look for an assassin somewhere else.

themselves. One of the coolest things about DX1 was discovering six or so hours into the game that UNATCO, your agency, is in fact evil and corrupt and the 'terrorists' are really the good guys. The same kind of thing happens in DX2... about five minutes into the game.

Cloak n' Dagger

Literally you start the game, walk down a corridor, speak to a character, then walk back up the corridor to discover your apartment is really just a cage with a

hear you cry. Well, for this grizzled reviewer, DX1 was a much more compelling game because JC Denton at least had a few allies, including a brother who would support him no matter which faction he worked for because he was his

no other game on the market gives such a well defined and effective set of choices

transparent roof through which scientists stare at you all day. Undoubtedly cool, yes, but this should have happened at least after you'd discovered where exactly it was you were living and who you thought you were working for, and why.

The writers of DX2 had to make a choice to compel the player to want to at least sound out each of the conflicting factions. They could have said "let's make all the factions sound essentially right and convincing" or, as they have in fact done, they could have made all the factions sound vaguely evil.

Yes, DX2 is a game with no good guys. Not even one. Good guys are for wusses! I

brother - not because JC was a valuable asset to his secret war.

Love n' Marriage

Honestly I never thought I'd complain in a review that nobody in this game loves me, but this seems a glaring omission in DX2's character dynamic. The hero has no friends. He is the quintessential loner. And because of this I felt compelled to choose the ending that let me say "stuff you!" to all the factions.

Yes, like DX1 there are multiple endings. And like the general mood of any human interaction in the game, all the endings are vaguely unsettling, compelling

INTERFACE COMPLAINTS

Of the many and varied complaints fired at DX2 following the release of the demo, the whining about the circular interface was the most bizarre. Rather than having a 'toolbelt' running along the bottom of the screen like in the original, DX2 has elegant curved bars on each side. In the demo, the interface was clustered a little too closely into the centre of the screen, 'wasting' the edges, but a patch fixed this. It's also possible to turn the opacity of the interface down so it only appears when you actually select something. However, of all the complaints about the interface, this one took the cake: "The interface is crap because it's circular. It's been dumbed-down for console. Ion Storm has forgotten that PC players are used to playing on a rectangular screen." I'd sure like to see his television.

you to go back and play for a different finish. Yet even when you've done all four, you still feel kind of ripped off by the writers. There should have been a goody-two-shoes ending, a defiant-freedom-loving-rebel ending and perhaps a self-indulgent-evil-overlord ending to cater for different RPG tastes, but instead all the endings seem to say "well done, you've completely screwed up the whole world."

Has Ion Storm screwed up with DX2? Not at all. This game is far better than anything else of this type currently available on PC, except perhaps Deus Ex. The ability to make real gameplay choices is an extremely refreshing inclusion in an FPS.

Scoring DX2 has been difficult. If the Deus Ex games were the only games in the world, DX1 would get 100 and DX2 would get 50. However, in a universe that includes the likes of Fire Warrior, DX2 still stands head and shoulders above the pack.

Anthony Fordham

RATING



FOR

Real choices
Streamlined
Replayable

AGAINST

Too much
conspiracy
Weak characters
Weak plot

OVERALL

Impeccable game
design not balanced
by the strength of
the actual plot

96



Broken Sword The Sleeping Dragon

Reviving the adventure genre with its last gasp for air



Developer: Revolution Software ■ Publisher: The Adventure Company ■ Distributor: THQ ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-600
128MB RAM
32MB Videocard

WANT

P4
128 MB Video Card
512MB RAM

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.templarstory.com
The ultimate Templar resource. You can even buy a Templar lapel pin for US\$5!

A lot has already been said about this title in the lead up to its release and how the health of the adventure genre has been riding on its shoulders. And we'll admit: we've had high hopes too. Without Losers in Leisure Suits or other whacky hooks, the previous two Broken Sword adventures proved that you could have contemporary adventure games that were smart and entertaining. So does The Sleeping Dragon deliver?

Yes, and well, no. It's not a revolution, rather a very definitive step in the right direction. The Sleeping Dragon is absolutely an adventure game, and an adventure game that proudly wears its roots on its sleeves. Yep, there are still plenty of silly puzzles to be worked out and you will feel caged in by the absolute linearity of it all at times (emergent

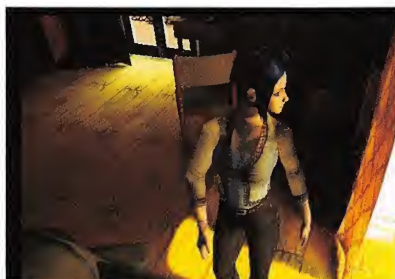
gameplay be damned!). However what strikes you after playing through the game is just how smartly developer Revolution Software has played to the strengths of the genre and exploited its weaknesses. Sure, they've made some questionable gameplay decisions along the way that will infuriate some, but on the whole these can be forgiven because The Sleeping Dragon offers a highly entertaining story told through a beautifully realised game world.

The Sleeping Dragon once again documents the events surrounding the

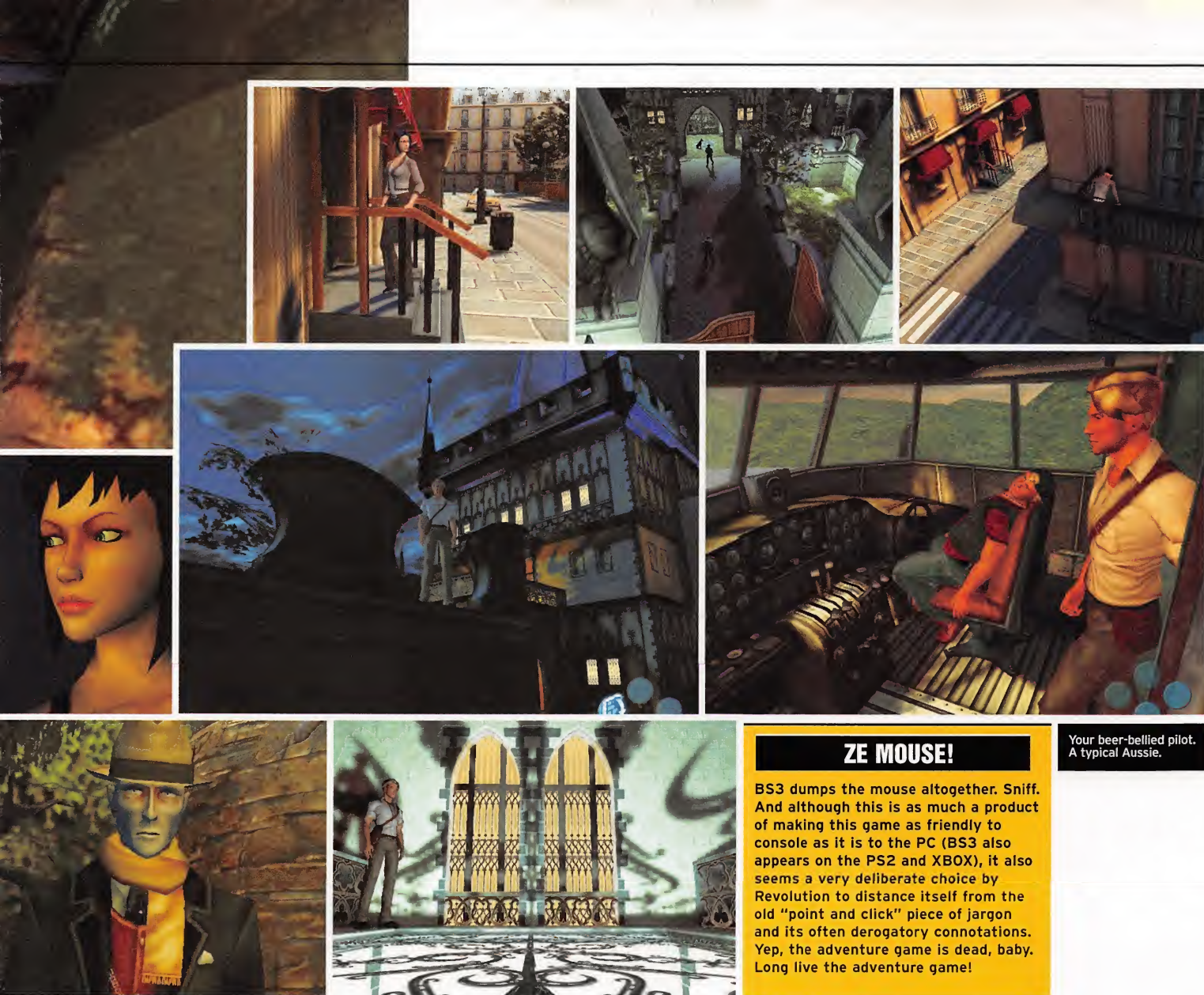
characters George Stobbart (an American patent lawyer) and Nico Collard (a French 'shournaleest') and although the game's two protagonists are half a world apart at the opening of the story, the murders of their individual subjects are linked and not before long the pair are reunited in a quest to save the world from megalomaniacal nasties that are somehow linked to the good ol' Knights Templar.

The duel-protagonist choice by Revolution is one of the game's strongest points, especially concerning narrative. This Broken Sword adventure follows its

offers a highly entertaining story told through a beautifully realised game world



predecessors in providing an exceptional mystery to unravel for George and 'good friend' Nico, however this time you play as both Nico and George throughout. And just as you've reached a crucial part of the game – say, one of the aforementioned murders – the control is switched to the other character in another part of the game world and another part of the adventure. The filmic way in which these two perspectives have been woven



together is exceptional.

However there is a crucial change to the proceedings: gone are the highly detailed two-dimensional game screens of Broken Sword and its sequel - BS3 is full 3D. With it comes a new style of play that sits somewhere between its predecessors and the likes of Tomb Raider's play. Unlike Gabriel Knight 3: Blood of the Sacred Blood of the Damned which used a 3D world and control via mouse and keyboard, it's keyboard only in BS3. What this means is that there's a lot more physical exploration to be done to progress through the game, as you have to walk the character up to an item before a menu can appear where the usual adventure game options can be accessed. Revolution has taken this control choice a step further; Nico and George can jump from platform to platform, shimmy across ledges and perform other Lara-like abilities. Though don't expect another Tomb Raider - Nico and George can't fall off ledges and jumps are automatic. This is action adventuring with the training wheels still on.

Dragon Sleeping in its Lair

There is another new gameplay mechanic that Revolution Software has experimented with in The Sleeping Dragon to some very mixed results. Reminiscent of the original interactive cartoon Dragon's Lair, there are periodic short action sequences which appear that require lightning quick

reflexes to negotiate successfully. The trouble is they're grossly incongruous to the other methods of control in the game, especially the more subdued platform jumping sequences. You see, they occur during cut-scenes, where convention has it that hands are off the controls because it's the game in the drivers seat for the moment. But no - they're only kidding. Just as you've settled into spectator mode you're asked to hit the action key during a window of opportunity that lasts no longer than a sliver of a second. If you miss it, you're dead. But even that's okay, because Revolution has accounted for your inability to catch on to their weird jibes, and will repeat the sequence from the very beginning (usually a good 60 seconds of dialogue away from the action sequence) until you get it right. And, you know, this reviewer never really got comfortable with it. It requires a keen eye to catch the first time round, and that keen eye usually misses the bigger picture of the story being told at the time. So instead, its recommended that you miss it the first time 'round, enjoy the story for what it is, then catch it again to hit the right button at the right time. And if you miss it again, it's cool - it ain't going anywhere.

The Sleeping Dragon also trips up a bit when it comes to the puzzles on offer. Most are fantastic and suit the realms of plausibility without becoming overly dull. It is however the "freedom" offered by the 3D engine that causes the most damage:

ZE MOUSE!

BS3 dumps the mouse altogether. Sniff. And although this is as much a product of making this game as friendly to console as it is to the PC (BS3 also appears on the PS2 and XBOX), it also seems a very deliberate choice by Revolution to distance itself from the old "point and click" piece of jargon and its often derogatory connotations. Yep, the adventure game is dead, baby. Long live the adventure game!

Your beer-bellied pilot. A typical Aussie.

Revolution got stuck on the old "crate pulling/pushing" puzzles that were made popular by the Tomb Raider and Zelda series. In some situations it fits well - especially during the opening sequence of the game as an example - but Revolution has gone overboard here. Simply put, crate puzzles are mostly horribly boring things and the game could have easily done as well without half of them.

But in the end, the more questionable design choices are easily forgiven because the important elements of this game - the story and the world design - are absolutely top notch. Revolution has absolutely lavished the game with fantastic visuals (although a tad more realistic, they're vibrant enough to stay true to the cartoon roots of the series) and exemplary audio. The voice acting is almost always brilliant, with dialogue and character development that invites you to become engaged with it. Character animation has also seen plenty of attention, with character gesticulation convincingly animated - simply put, the characters in The Sleeping Dragon act.

And although it may feel a little stiff at times, there's plenty of self-referential humour throughout Broken Sword. Yes - Broken Sword 3 admits - the genre has its limits. But it also resoundingly shows that these sorts of games can still be plenty of fun too.

RATING



FOR

Tight story, tight script and tight French journalists.

AGAINST

Cruddy action sequences, crate puzzles after crate puzzles.

OVERALL

The adventure game is back, people, and with a bang

82

March Stepnik



My, what a heroic chin you have, sir!

Beyond Good & Evil

When Nietzsche met Rayman

Developer: Ubi Soft ■ Publisher: Ubi Soft ■ Distributor: Ubi Soft ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

700 Mhz CPU
128Mb RAM
32Mb Videocard
2.2 Gb HDD space

WANT

1.2Ghz+
256Mb RAM
64Mb Videocard

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

<http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/FriedrichNietzsche/>
I hate to go all Nietzsche on you but the man had some pretty darned cool things to say which are bound to be ripped off in games over and over

Byond Good & Evil comes from the same slightly odd French mind as Rayman. In case you're not up on your platform games, think of Rayman as Ubi Soft's trippy, but groovy, answer to Mario and Sonic.

Trippy seems to be just Michel Ancel's natural style and it's like he has aimed for something a little darker and more adult this time around but he just couldn't quite leave his old paint set behind. What we get with BG&E is an oddly comfortable Disney-style cartoon infected with creepy face-hugger aliens. As you can imagine, there's quite a story tying all of this together, and it's actually pretty good.

Jade is a renowned photo journalist who also happens to be looking after kids orphaned by a continuing war between the Alpha Section, which is defending her planet, and the nasty DomZ.

Naturally, all is not what it seems and Jade gets drawn into a planet wide-conspiracy that hints at her own secret past as well as explaining why her uncle is a pig-man complete with tusks. If you're looking for John Grisham or even Chris Carter, this ain't it, but it is close enough.

The real accomplishment here is that everything seems to fit together, from the dark nastiness of the bad guys, to the comic relief of pig-men uncles. It even

neatly wraps the host of mini-games that make up the body and soul of the game.

Ghouls on Film

Being a photojournalist, most of Jade's action involves a camera lens. Your very first assignment is to catalogue every creature you can find for the national archive. This means you can always make a quick buck by taking happy snaps of any new creatures; especially the ones which are trying to kill you.

Jade also gets to use her camera to scan maps and code locks, but, most

that if there is another solidier nearby they can fix the tank and undo your handy work. This breaks up the sneaking with well-placed boots, more hiding and then quick action as your first victim acts as a great distraction. If you just take the cheap shot and get the first guy, you won't get very far, since he'll soon be back on the beat, with his friend in tow. This is just one example of how elements such as combat, stealth and puzzle solving all come together in a bow.

Even when you just have straight fighting, things are still pretty interesting.

it's more about action, puzzles, mini-games and plenty of interaction with the environment

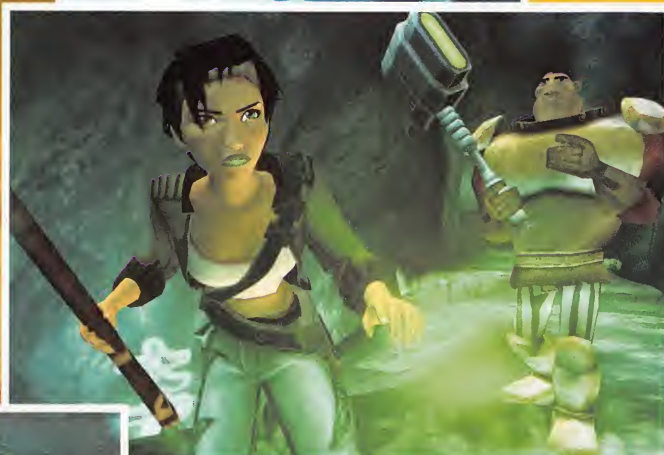
importantly, she uses it to gather evidence and expose the truth. The camera action is just the tip of the iceberg and all of Ancel's platform experience comes out swinging.

In one part of the game there are these armoured troops who you can only beat by giving them a swift blow to the back of the air-tank. Once you do this they run around madly trying to get fumes out of their face mask, but what's really cool is

You have your basic attack button that launches Jade into her combo, but the right mouse button is a dodge that skips her back or to the side. Since you can knock bad guys into electric fences (which block your path otherwise) or off cliffs, the dodge movement adds more strategy than you'd expect. Of course, you can just run around as well. The usual power-ups also appear and since Jade usually has a friend along simple tag-team moves also put in

JUMPING JEHOSEPHAT

Beyond Good & Evil is really weird for a platform(ish) game because you don't have to worry about jumping between platforms. If there's a gap Jade just jumps over it. If she can't quite clear it she'll catch the edge and pull herself up, if there's no hope she just won't go. That's not to say that there's no jumping to be done, Jade has to dive roll over (around and through) deadly laser beams and bounce over mines and so on, you just don't run off dead drops like a blind lemming which is quite pleasant really.



an appearance. The battles are well thought out and the end of level bosses call on plenty of Ancel's platform experience to offer up something new each time.

Jade also has a hovercraft at her disposal which leads to fast combat, upgrades, chases and races which breaks up the usual switch pulling, crate pushing, climbing, jumping and clue-finding. Oh yeah, there's even a weird air-hockey game. It's all good and it all fits.

Beyond the Good

The game would be an awesome escapade if it didn't feel a little shoe-horned onto the PC. From the opening screen you notice that you can't mouse scroll over the new options: you have to use the W and S key to move up and down and then use the mouse button to select. What's that?

The controls, in general, seem a little off with mouse and keyboard and you can't remap a single button. Save points also enhance the console feel but they aren't too bad, since if you die you just go back to the beginning of the encounter.

What is a problem, however, is the camera. For much of the time you can run around with mouse look and use "W" as forward. This is fine until you

unexpectedly hit a section with a fixed camera which makes "W" up, or some even less predictable direction.

I've actually seen a character move forward around a wall, have a camera angle change, keep moving forward and then hit the edge of a walkway and turn back around, all without releasing the forward button. When a fixed camera is on 45 degree angle even knowing which way is up gets interesting.

Then you have the times your vision disappears into a mountain or your hovercraft just seems to spin on the spot as you look through its bonnet. These little glitches can be quite annoying, especially with mines, bad guys and laser beams around. Most of the time the camera isn't a huge problem; but when it decides to give you trouble, it just keeps on giving.

Veteran gamers will also probably find the puzzle elements a little too simple. This isn't one of the brain-bending adventure games that PC users are used to. It's much more about action with the puzzles rounding out the mini-games and giving players plenty of interaction with their colourful environment.

SOUNDS FAMILIAR

If you're wondering where you have heard the title Beyond Good & Evil before, then you're probably some form of culture/ philosophy geek like me. Good old Friedrich Nietzsche wrote his version of Beyond Good and Evil back in 1886. He's the guy with the quote, "if you gaze for long into an abyss, the abyss gazes also into you," which countless games have used. His BG&E was a "devastating diagnosis of the worthlessness of contemporary existence" according to back cover of my Penguin Classics soft cover. Don't worry, if any of this is in the game, it's well hidden by Rasta rhino mechanics, Dirk Daring-style super agents and magic staff super attacks.

At least Jade's hair isn't in pig tails...

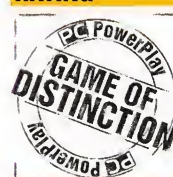
Beyond Kids and Platforms

Beyond Good & Evil has a nice, rounded feel to it, not just in the graphics but in the whole game experience. It's like a weird little cinematic fairy-tale and best of all, for a story-heavy game, you still have some choices. Sure, you might have to get 15 pearls to get to the next core mission, but you have a bunch of ways to get them. If you can't win the hovercraft races you can collect cash to try buy the ones on sale, you can win them gambling, you can go out with a pearl detector or you can collect the bonus pearls from completing rolls of film. There's a lot to do here and it's all Disney meets infectious alien mutants.

If you are looking for Deus Ex in cartoon clothing, this isn't it; but BG&E is a very stylish platform adventure which aims above just being kids stuff and brings home the bacon.

Timothy C. Best

RATING



FOR

Cinematic Cartoon-style
Slick mini-games
Rollicking
Adventure

AGAINST

Feels tad ported
litty camera

OVERALL

Stylish platform
action with a little
something dark
and extra

82

Storm Angel

Fools rush in where crappy shooters... uh, never mind



Developer: Loaded ■ Publisher: Loaded ■ Distributor: Loaded ■ Price: TBC ■ Rating: TBC ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-667
64MB RAM
32MB Video card
500MB HDD

WANT

P4-1GHz+
256MB RAM
GeForce4
500MB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.storm.com
Thinking of launching a satellite but haven't yet decided how to handle telemetry? Well then this is the site for you! World leaders in turn-key ground based solutions! Phwoar!

RATING



OVERALL

Add ten points if you can find it for less than \$10

57

Uh okay, so who ordered the plain side-scrolling shooter without dressing? Come on, someone must have ordered it. I'm happy to sit here all night until someone owns up to having ordered it because I sure as hell don't want to spend a cent on this damn thing, split bill or no split bill.

Storm Angel is Loaded's answer to a question nobody asked, namely "whatever happened to all those great side-scrolling shooters that used to be on the PC like, uh... Project X and um... er..." If games were sold in supermarkets, Storm Angel's box would be printed in black and yellow - this is strictly no-frills gaming.

Home brand

The player controls a little ship that hangs suspended magically in mid air while the gameworld scrolls past it at a fixed speed. Various enemy ships spiral on and off the screen, some of them firing bullets, most just tracing out not-very-intricate paths so the player has a good chance of shooting them all. Every now and then a larger ship will slide in from the right and hang around until destroyed or until it slowly crawls off the left hand side of the screen. An ultra-sensitive collision model causes the player's ship to explode if it touches any enemy ships,

XENON2 & TYRIAN 2000

Okay, so if you want a low-impact shooter to remind you of your callow youth spent at the arcades, then these two games are for you. Xenon2 can be found on any good abandonware site and the Tyrian demo is still floating around on most good FTPs such as Fileplanet. Don't expect amazing graphics, but do expect considerably better gameplay than this "modern" pile of cack.

bullets or occasionally the empty space just next to either.

It's the most obvious gameplay model in the world, except for perhaps the vertical scroller to which it is closely related. Way back in the distant past (ie the early 90s) side-scrollers were championed by such exalted games as R-Type and the mighty Gradius (slay the Bacteroids!) and played by legions of fans who only had really low powered machines.

Cheap eats

It would be nice to say that a return to a side-scrolling shooter is like a return to some ancient, half-forgotten sacred place, long buried under the jungle of modern

developments like FPS and RTS, but unfortunately revisiting the side-scrolling genre via Storm Angel reminds us only of one thing - these kinds of games were never very good.

Is it 'fun' to sit with your finger jammed down on the fire button dodging bullets and enemies for five minutes per level, occasionally picking up a cash bonus or weapon powerup? Well, it can be if the weapon design is inspired and the enemies are cool. Unfortunately, Storm Angel loses out on both counts - even the end of level shop is bereft of both personality and worthwhile upgrades. You quickly understand that all you can really do is slowly save up for the next most powerful weapon, which looks exactly like your current weapon except the beams are a different colour.

Okay, so Storm Angel is useful in killing that awkward ten minutes before The Simpsons that are too short to let you get into any other game, but a lasting joy this ain't. Still, on the bright side it should either enter the market in the bargain bins or wind up there quickly, so if you can get it for less than the price of a movie ticket I say, what the hell. It's only a side dish, after all.

Anthony Fordham





The bowler's Holding the batsman's Willey.



Like a team full of Brad Hogg

Developer: hb studios ■ Publisher: EA Sports ■ Distributor: EA Sports ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: G ■ Available: Now

Cricket 2004 takes up the baton from the ageing 2002 installment with a raft of additions, tweaks and refinements which mostly answer all the criticisms of that earlier version, with the notable exception of one big boo-boo that we'll mention later. There are several significant changes to the game mechanics which create a much more sim-like feel to the action as opposed to the arcade style slog fest that was Cricket 2002.

Batsmen now have to deal with a 'confidence meter' which acts as a limiter on their abilities while it is building up to its maximum level. This is done by successfully timing your strokes and gradually working your run makers into the groove, in the same way that it takes real players a while to get their eye in. It is now very difficult to bring in a fresh batsman and get them slogging sixes from their first delivery, and therefore more realistic. This

NO MULTIPLAYER?

Bah! It seems that EA Sports' budget has once again failed to stretch enough to cover the inclusion of any kind of multiplayer action in the latest iteration of their Cricket series. How much sweeter are your victories over fellow humans than over any AI? Much! However all is not lost, perhaps with a bit of arm twisting we can talk EA Sports and hb studios into making a multiplayer patch? Here is the relevant address: info@hb-studios.com If that doesn't work perhaps we could threaten the entire board of EA with adoption by Shane Warne's mum? Who knows, she's probably pretty lonely these days, sitting and staring out from the barred windows of her fortress-like crack house in Cabramatta.



a much more sim-like feel to the action as opposed to the earlier arcade-style slog fest of 2002

also encourages players to use a wider variety of strokes instead of just going for the big ones from every delivery.

Bowling has also been given a tweak with the ball cursor now a little easier to control as you line up your next delivery. The improved opponent AI (depending on the level of difficulty you have set) will also make you think a bit more about what kind of ball you are going to send down the pitch. Of all the bowling types spinners have gained the most from the bowling enhancements with much more being put on the ball, resulting in more movement off the pitch. Bowling has been made more realistic by less direct means

as well, as the game now tracks the ball condition and changes its behaviour accordingly. The type and condition of the pitch also has more effect than before, allowing bowlers to use realistic tactics against their opponents.

Away from the game mechanics there is another great new feature in the choice of game modes called Foreign Tour. This simulates any one of eleven possible tours of one of the four cricketing areas around the world (Asia, Africa, West Indies and England) and includes matches against regional as well as national teams.

The presentation of Cricket 2004 is nothing to get excited about, but good

enough to immerse you in the game. The stadiums are a bit sterile and the crowds a bit blocky but on the positive side the player motion captures look much better. The improved animation even adds to the gameplay as smoother running between the wickets now makes taking runs more predictable and safer. The commentary on the other hand seems mostly copied from the earlier version of the game, has some very noticeable pauses, and is quite repetitive.

Cricket 2004 is a big improvement over its older sibling and is much more of a simulation of the game of cricket rather than an arcade game. New play modes, gameplay enhancements and AI make this one a must for fans of the earlier title, however those of you waiting for the chance to play against your friends will sadly have to keep waiting.

George Soropos

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 500
64MB RAM
32MB Video
900MB HD
8MB Audio

WANT

PIII/AMD 1GHz+
256MB RAM

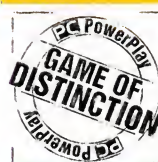
MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.bauyygreen.com.au
Live score updates. Ball-by-ball commentary. It's got it all. This is every office workers companion during the long summer months.

RATING



OVERALL

A definite improvement over Cricket 2002.

75



UFO: Aftermath

All that remains of a once-proud dynasty

Developer: Altar ■ Publisher: Cenega ■ Distributor: Take 2 ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M ■ Available: Now

SYSTEM

NEED

P3-500
128MB RAM
32MB Video c

WANT

P4-2GHz+
256MB RAM
64MB Video card
1.25GB HDD

MULTIPLAYER

No

ONLINE

www.abovetopsecret.com
Yep, it's the "Internet's most popular conspiracy discussion forum". This is where the REAL genetic freaks hang out.

RATING



OVERALL

Vaguely reminiscent of the classic X-COM, but otherwise mediocre

66

Ever since spiking originality's drink at a sleazy nightclub, luring it into a back alley and beating seventeen kinds of crap out of it, the games industry - like Hollywood - has been free to stop worrying about whether the Latest New Thing will actually work and instead just keep pumping out remakes of old stuff that probably didn't even need to be remade. I mean, Thunderbirds: The Movie? What the hell?

Latest to join this ever-accelerating trend is UFO: Aftermath, a 3D RTS/turn-based hybrid of a game we all played nine years ago in the form of UFO: Enemy Unknown (aka X-Com). The premise is that aliens have unexpectedly attacked Earth (as usual) and scattered hideous spores throughout the atmosphere, either killing or grotesquely mutating everyone. Naturally, a few folks survive immune, and they tend to be total badasses, so the setting is ripe for the tattered fragments of Big Government to commission a new secret taskforce to repel the alien invaders.

Bad puppets

Through a series of randomly generated missions the player will slowly build a squad of these badasses who must take it - time and time again - to the alien hordes. The game is split into two parts - the RTS/turn-based tactical section and the RTS strategy map. The latter is a rather nicely rendered globe studded with various icons to let you know where your bases are, where the aliens are attacking and how your research and resource gathering is going.

The original XCOM allowed the player to actually design their bases, positioning defences so that when aliens inevitably attacked they could expect a difficult fight on their hands. Unfortunately, in



X-COM: THE DYNASTY

XCOM, or as we originally knew it here in Australia back in 1994, UFO: Enemy Unknown is sort of a distant, slightly estranged grandfather to UFO: Aftermath. It was fully turn-based and like Aftermath, split into the strategic and tactical sections. A purer gameplay dynamic - none of this hybrid nonsense - meant XCOM was a lot more fun to play than this remake, and perversely enough the more primitive sprite-based VGA graphics are actually a lot clearer than Aftermath's murky transgenents.

Aftermath the bases are generated randomly - and the strategic nous of the generator is sadly lacking. You'll be frustrated as time and time again the game creates a base for you that the enemy can practically just walk all over.

Of course, this assumes you get into the game far enough to actually have bases and research new technologies. This is by no means guaranteed because the tactical section of the game - where you actually do the fighting on a 3D map - manages to be awkward, tedious and frustrating in even measure.

The problem is this: RTS/turn-based hybridisation - the game runs in real time until one of your squaddies either encounters an enemy, finishes a move order or the game decides it wants to tell you something. Then the game pauses and control IMMEDIATELY switches to whatever the game thinks is important - which means you can be in the middle of giving a squaddie an order only to have it unwittingly applied to a completely different team member.

Stale bread

Couple this with an inventory system that will make you scream - you can't swap weapons, you need to put down a weapon, move the one you're carrying into the cramped inventory, and then pick up the new weapon again - and tedious is hardly the word.

Bottom line, the game has everything that made XCOM great, in there somewhere. There are even a few improvements, such as equipping your squad in the first place, which is much easier now. But the bread and butter of the game is sadly broken... or stale, or whatever best sustains the metaphor - half the time you feel like you're fighting the game, not the aliens it throws at you.

Once again, a remake with better technology and years of hindsight fails to capture the spirit of the original.

Anthony Fordham



Horizons: Empire of Istaria

There be Dragons!

Developer: Artifact Entertainment ■ Publisher: Atari ■ Distributor: Atari ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Rating: M 15+ ■ Available: Now

Just when you thought that nobody could add anything of interest to a new fantasy MMORPG along comes Horizons to prove you wrong. Although not nearly as revolutionary as the developer would have liked - when development started four years ago it was tipped to be the next big thing and the definitive Everquest killer - Horizons is different enough to warrant a look if you're a veteran of the genre wanting a change and accessible enough that new players should be able to comfortably ease their way in.

Oh yeah, it also has dragons. Now before anyone chimes in to tell me I'm an idiot because other MMORPGs featured dragons before Horizons came along, let me say that I fully acknowledge that fact. Dragons in Horizons are different. Aside from being better looking than many of the boxy monstrosities seen in earlier games, Horizons' dragons are fully available to play as a race and what's more they're available to play right off the bat - no waiting around for them to be unlocked or given as a reward for having a

SUBJUGATION

Instead of featuring prestige races and classes that are rewarded to long time player (a common tactic for MMOs), Horizons feature what they call the "subjugated" races. The first time the player encounters these races they will be hostile due to the fact that they haven't yet been freed from the auspices of evil but as the game progresses and the player meets certain criteria they will become friendly and eventually available to play. At this time the developer hasn't divulged whether the unlocking of the new race will be a global event or whether it will be player specific.

long term account.

The fact that you can play a dragon is a big plus, but if Horizons had an inaccessible system it really wouldn't be worth the effort. Luckily the developer has created a very user friendly and malleable

system that fuses the old school crafting mechanics of Ultima Online and some more modern sensibilities.

Characters from any of the eight humanoid races can choose two classes to begin with, one professional class such as warrior or healer as well as one crafting class such as blacksmith or outfitter. Each class has its own skills and mutually exclusive experience system necessitating that players need to spend equal portions of their time fighting and creating items to effectively level up their characters.

Due to the emphasis put onto item crafting there are no real shops in the world of Istaria and no real monster loot aside from the occasional bit of money, crafting material or schematic. If players want to succeed in the harsh land they must be able to make their own high level equipment or at least know someone willing to trade.

Dragons on the other hand need to choose exclusively from the dragon classes and skills but as a trade off do not need equipment to be effective. Instead of needing the equipment to use their skills, dragons can hoard their spoils in stereotypical dragon fashion, thereby increasing their attack, defense and magic power. Being winged creatures dragons can also fly.

Although the net code for Horizons is nice and smooth, the actual graphics engine is unforgivably chuggy, especially considering the lack of fine detail and limited animations. Lacklustre the graphics may be, but the sound is outstanding, comprising some excellent monster and weapon effects, excellent though sparse voice acting and a great dynamic soundtrack that smoothly segues from town to combat to crafting.

Daniel Wilks

SYSTEM

NEED

PIII 850MHz or equivalent CPU
256Mb RAM
32Mb DX8.1 Video Card
2Gb HDD
56k Internet connection

WANT

P4 1.4MHz or equivalent CPU
512Mb RAM
128Mb DX8.1 Video Card
2Gb HDD
Broadband connection

MULTIPLAYER

Naturally

ONLINE

www.istaria.com
All you need to know about patches, servers, upcoming events, rule changes, etc.

RATING



OVERALL

A valiant attempt to further the genre but hampered by a lack of mission variety.

71

Horizons is different enough to warrant a look if you're a veteran of the genre



TECH IN REVIEW

If you've just bought new hardware, do not, under any circumstances, read our PC of 2004 feature. If you do you're likely to burst into tears, before swearing to Lucifer that you'll never buy PC hardware ever again. Yes, there's a whole raft of new hardware due to hit shelves in March and April, and it's going to make your recent purchase either totally obsolete or plummet in price. Unfortunately the continual improvement of PC hardware is a double edged sword; while it helps to keep the PC on the cutting edge of gaming, it also brings with it continual upgrades, which equates to a persistent stinging sensation in the financial region. But we wouldn't have it any other way, would we?

Due to time constraints over the Xmas break, we had to lure Asher into the labs with the promise of a free RADEON 9800, only to lock him in until he'd tested thirty different input devices for this issue's PowerTest. Poor bugger - by the end of it he'd managed to develop a nice case of RSI. But at least you guys will know which game controller will help you raise your CS statistics, and you need to know, because this final link between you and your PC is one of the most overlooked areas of PC hardware. Unfortunately we found it next to impossible to source joysticks, which is a worrying sign for flight sim fanatics.

Other nuggets of technological splendour this month include a beastly pre-built media PC from a company who is known foremost for its chain of German supermarkets. Obviously. We've also got a couple of 5950's duking it out, as well as one of the finest new MP3 players around, the latest in Creative's



67 Powertest Control Freak

NOMAD MuVo range, which crams an incredible 1.5GB of capacity into a tiny package. And if you'd prefer a silent PC as opposed to one that sounds like a chopper in Desert Combat taking off, check out Stuart's reviews of a couple of bits of silencing gear.

You could say that we've had a rather interesting month when it comes to hardware. But it's nothing compared to what we've got in store for the next couple of months...

Bennett Ring
Deputy Editor,
bennett@next.com.au

74 Medion Multimedia PC Titanium MD 8080 XL

75 GeForce FX 5950 shootout: MSI vs Gigabyte

76 Silent-Solution Kit

76 VGA Silencer

78 TDK TS-150R Tremor speakers

78 MSI DR8-A DVD+R/+RW Writer

80 U-Storage Mega Memory Watch

80 Creative NOMAD MuVo

HOW WE TESTED

For an in-depth explanation of how we test video cards, CPUs, and motherboards head to our PowerTools section on page 104. You'll also see a list of hardware that makes up the PCPP testbenches, which are used for the testing of the majority of our hardware.

Where possible we use benchmarks based on real world games to test hardware performance; this way we know for sure which component will give you the best gaming experience. We don't love hardware for hardware's sake - it's all about using this hardware to make your

entertainment even more, well, entertaining. We also try to compare the review product with the current "best of class" piece of hardware, so at the end of the day you'll know exactly which product offers you the best bang for buck.

For a product to earn a Power Award, price be damned, we're just looking at how this product performs. If there's nothing better, that we've seen at least, it'll get the Power Award. However, if a product offers a great level of performance or features for a very reasonable price, it'll get the Value Award. Simple, really.





KILLING 2 BIRDS WITH ONE STONE

You'll notice that Microsoft's mouse and keyboard kits include the same mice as those we're reviewing separately. For example, the Microsoft Wireless Intellimouse Explorer is the same mouse that comes with the Microsoft Wireless Desktop Pro kit. Therefore, it would be superfluous to include accuracy benchmarks for both, and thus, this is the reason why some products have been omitted from our benchmark graphs.

Upon learning of the topic for this month's Powertest, you're probably wondering, why the hell are these goons reviewing keyboards and mice? Has their creative flair taken a vacation or something? However, as you'll learn if you continue reading, mice and keyboards, not to mention most other input devices, are just as important to gamers, if not more so, than even the video card.

While we're happy to spout on each month about the latest and greatest in the world of internal hardware components, devices that are used to manipulate said components are often left by the wayside. These are known as input devices. Ironically, input devices also happen to be the most critical aspect of any system, as, without them there can be no human interaction with the PC. Without a

CONTROL FREAK

By Asher Moses

doubt, the two most renowned input devices are mice (or mouses, for the lefties) and keyboards, however, the term is far broader than that, encompassing steering wheels, joysticks, gamepads, and even mousing surfaces. Basically, any peripheral that is used to transfer or assist in the transfer of data from the outside world into a computer system can be said to fall under this single category.

As you can imagine, the relevance of input devices is even greater for gamers, as while the everyday user is happy to stick with the old beige ball mouse and keyboard that he/she's owned ever since the days of the 386, most gamers require far more precision and accuracy than such generic devices are capable of providing. As far as the importance of other controllers such as joysticks, steering wheels and gamepads are concerned, while not always necessary, they certainly heighten enjoyment

and realism levels.

With that in mind, we scoured the web and compiled the most comprehensive list of input devices humanly possible, and over copious alcoholic beverages during the Christmas/New Year break, narrowed this list down to a handsome 30 products. Thinking of purchasing an input device within the next six months? Do yourself a favour and read on!

Testing Methodology

The broad nature of this PowerTest has meant that we've had to adopt a number of different strategies for testing depending on the type of product, however, the core test bed has remained constant throughout. All products were tested on an Athlon 64 3200-based system,

WHERE HAVE ALL THE JOYSTICKS GONE?

We have to apologise for the lack of variety in our joystick coverage, however, this was unfortunately out of our hands. We originally planned to test Thrustmaster and Saitek's offerings as well as those we received from Logitech (Microsoft

has stopped manufacturing game controllers), but certain unnamed distributors refused to supply us with review samples. Having said that, we'll leave you to come to your own conclusion regarding these actions.

the relevance of input devices is even greater for gamers

featuring a Gigabyte K8NXP motherboard and the standard components listed on the Powertools page. As far as mice and mousing surfaces are concerned, we've obtained quantitative measures of performance using the S.H.U.D v2 mod for Quake 3 Arena (available on

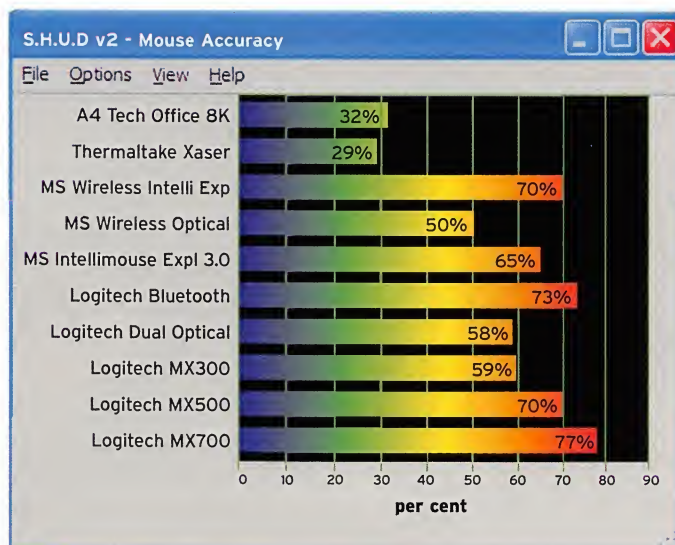
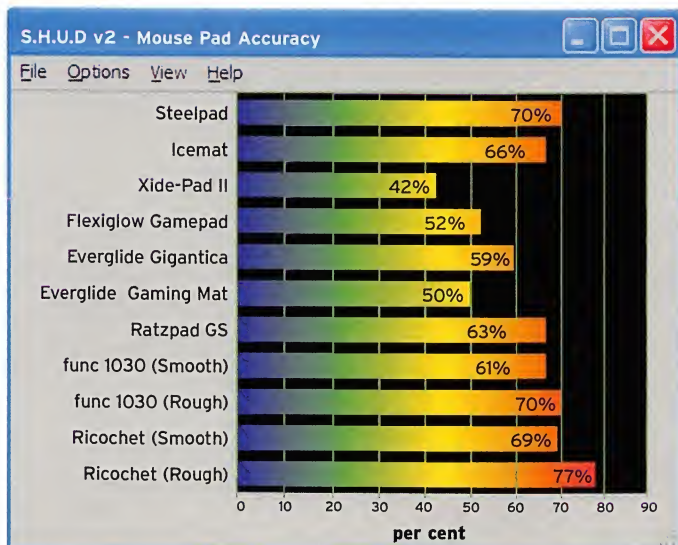
FilePlanet.com), and qualitative measures through extensive testing using a number of games (mainly shooters), including Counter-Strike, Call of Duty and Max Payne 2. S.H.U.D enables users to measure their accuracy across all weapons in a percentage format, and we decided to take advantage of this by testing each mouse and mousing surface in a 10 minute bot match (we played against a single bot with a "Bring it on" skill level) on Q3DM17 equipped with only a railgun, measuring our cumulative accuracy over this time.

Additionally, joysticks were tested using Microsoft Flight Simulator 2004 and Lock On: Modern Air Combat, while steering wheels were given a thrashing in Need for Speed Underground. Gamepads were tested using Tony Hawk's Pro Skater 4. Furthermore, it's also important to note that all mice were tested using the Everglide Ricochet mousing surface, while all mousing surfaces were tested with the Logitech MX700 mouse in order to keep results as accurate as possible. Finally, all products (if relevant) were tested for at least one hour in terms of general use, non-gaming applications, in order to give us an overall idea regarding the competence of each product.

SUBJECTIVITY VS. OBJECTIVITY

While we are obviously able to give objective opinions regarding feature-set, price and layout, etc, it's impossible for us to be objective with regards to performance as the preferred style of say, a mousing surface, is undeniably going to differ between people. Having said that, however, we of course endeavoured throughout testing to keep personal preferences out of our scoring, and believe that we have succeeded in doing so with most products.

Furthermore, we also consider ourselves fairly hardcore gamers, so if we like a product, chances are that you'll like it too.



Logitech MX300

• Price: \$65.80 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

Being the low-end product in Logitech's MX range, the MX300 isn't exactly the most feature-rich mouse available, with a meagre four-button layout (Mouse 1, 2 and 3, as well as an ALT+TAB-like function) being all the rodent has to offer. While its performance

is certainly nothing to sneeze at, with the MS Intellimouse Explorer v3 being over \$10 cheaper and offering, in our opinion, better performance, we see no reason to purchase the MX300 unless you're a Logitech fanboy.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 2/5
Performance: 3/5
Overall: 2.5/5



Logitech MX500

• Price: \$67.70 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

Think of the MX500 as the MX700 with a cord, and you'll have a fairly good idea of how the MX500 performs. The MX500 includes all of the features of the MX700, and performs fairly close to it to boot. Although you don't get the added advantage of wireless

technology, at such a low price, we'd definitely recommend it for any hardcore gamer looking for a low priced upgrade.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 4/5



Logitech MX700

• Price: \$121.40 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

Where Microsoft's wireless mousing products fail, the MX700 succeeds. Not only is this the highest performing mouse of this roundup, but it's also wireless, allowing gamers to have the best of both worlds where they'd previously have to choose between wires, or

poor performance. Coming packaged with a handy charging dock, you'll never have to worry about your batteries running out in the middle of a frag session again, and provided you can afford the high price tag, this mouse is the epitome of gaming control perfection.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4/5
Performance: 5/5
Overall: 4.5/5



Logitech MouseMan Dual Optical

• Price: \$70.40 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

Although it's a generation older than Logitech's new MX range, the Dual Optical can be had for around the same price as the far superior MX500 - a clear indicator that the product is about to be phased out. To be blunt, while it was among the best of its time, the Dual

Optical's lack of features and high price, coupled with the fact that its performance isn't anywhere near that of the MX500 make crossing this one off your short list a no-brainer.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 2/5
Performance: 2.5/5
Overall: 2.5/5



Logitech Cordless Desktop MX for Bluetooth

• Price: \$399.95 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

The Logitech Cordless Desktop MX is very similar to Microsoft's Executive mouse/keyboard combo. Specifically, the keyboard itself includes plenty of handy shortcuts and multimedia controls, as well as a scroll wheel for quick navigation.

The mouse included is the MX900 (the Bluetooth version of the MX700), which, despite the change in wireless technology performs just as good as the MX700 - not an easy feat. Disregarding its exorbitant price, it's the most impressive mouse/keyboard combo we've seen.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 5/5
Performance: 5/5
Overall: 4.5/5



Microsoft Wireless Desktop Executive Edition

• Price: \$249.95 • Distributor: Microsoft www.microsoft.com.au

Both the palm rest on the keyboard and the majority of the mouse (a Wireless Explorer v2) is covered in faux leather, which makes both devices extremely comfortable to use. Additionally, the mouse and keyboard feature tilt wheels for convenient scrolling,

while the top of the board is lined with a plethora of shortcut buttons. The bottom line is that this combo simply has it all - copious features, excellent performance and a sexy design. If only it came with rechargeable batteries and didn't require 5 AA's to operate...

PCPP SCORE

Features: 5/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 4/5



Microsoft Wireless Optical Desktop Pro v2

• Price: \$168.95 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

This mouse/keyboard combo features the same Wireless Explorer v2 mouse that we have also reviewed separately in this article. The top of the board features an array of buttons including shortcuts to various commonly used folders, audio controls, and application

shortcuts. However, it would have been nice if Microsoft had included a few unassigned buttons as well (as seen on the "Executive Edition"). If you're willing to spend \$115 on the mouse, why not put down \$40 extra for this combo and receive a great, matching keyboard as well?

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3.5/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 4/5



Microsoft Intellimouse Explorer v3.0

• Price: \$51.70 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

Possibly the oldest mouse featured in this roundup, the MS Intellimouse v3 is considered by many as the best gaming mouse ever produced. While it's fairly lacking in the features department being a wired mouse with only five configurable buttons, it costs less

than half the price of the MX700 yet still manages to perform extremely close to it. While it isn't as ergonomic or feature-rich as Microsoft's latest offerings, the fact that it offers stellar performance at a ridiculously low price means that you should take a look at this mouse.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 2.5/5
Performance: 4.5/5
Overall: 4/5



Microsoft Wireless Optical Mouse

• Price: \$55.75 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

Like its high-end sibling, the MS Wireless Optical features a tilt wheel and lacks a charging dock, however, its design is ambidextrous - a huge bonus for the lefties. Being a budget product, the Wireless Optical features a simple three button layout, with few features and

a relatively short battery life. Coupled with the fact that the superior Intellimouse Explorer v3.0 can be had for around the same price makes it impossible for us to recommend this to anyone but those that who need wireless support on a very tight budget.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 2/5
Performance: 3/5
Overall: 3/5



Microsoft Wireless Intellimouse Explorer v2

• Price: \$114.75 • Distributor: Anyware www.anyware.com.au

This mouse is extremely comfortable to use for prolonged periods of time, made possible by ergonomic finger-grooves, as well as a rounded, right-handed design and logically placed buttons. Furthermore, in an attempt to be innovative, Microsoft has also included a new-fangled "Tilt wheel",

allowing the scroll wheel to move from left to right as well as up and down. While performance isn't as crash hot as Logitech's MX700, it certainly comes close, and this coupled with its ergonomic design makes it an ideal purchase for those looking for a balance between performance and comfort.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 4/5



A4 Tech Wireless Optical Office 8K

• Price: \$52 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

Right down to its colouring and shape, the A4 Tech wireless mouse is almost identical to the MX700 from Logitech. Unfortunately this mouse turned out to be one of the worst performers of the roundup, due to its inferior wireless implementation. Although the

device is perfect for general use, not to mention feature-rich with eight programmable buttons, a handy "OfficeJump" function that mirrors the ALT+TAB function on your keyboard and an intuitive software interface, the lag it produces during gaming is simply inexcusable.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4.5/5
Performance: 2.5/5
Overall: 3/5



Thermaltake Xaser Office Keyboard and Optical Mouse

• Price: \$65 • Distributor: Anyware www.anyware.com.au

While this may be the most colourful mouse/keyboard combo of this roundup, that's about where it ends. Although the keyboard boasts a plethora of inbuilt hotkeys, a handy scroll wheel and a slim design, its performance leaves much to be desired. Not only is

typing uncomfortable, but the entire product has a cheap, flimsy feel about it. Couple this with the fact that the generic optical mouse has a noticeably slower gaming response when compared to the better offerings, and it's clear that this product is a bit of a dud.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4/5
Performance: 2/5
Overall: 2/5



Foldable Keyboard

• Price: \$48 • Distributor: Anyware www.anyware.com.au

This generic foldable keyboard is essentially a keyboard membrane encased in a rubber shell, resulting in a number of advantages. This includes being foldable and compact, and dust resistant, however, this is where the advantages end. Abnormal amounts

of pressure need to be applied to the keys whilst typing, while the flexible nature of the board makes it extremely easy to hit the wrong key on a regular basis. An interesting product in theory, but in the form of this product, it simply sucks.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 2/5
Performance: 1/5
Overall: 1.5/5



Zippy Slim Illuminated Keyboard EL 715

• Price: \$99 • Distributor: Anyware www.anyware.com.au

A practical use for this keyboard is for those that are up on their PC late into the night once the rest of the family has retired to the bedroom. It also happens to look extremely cool, with a blue backlight that can be toggled on/off at will. Furthermore, the board

includes all of your standard-fare keyboard features; however, it unfortunately lacks hot keys and fold down feet. The board's performance is great with decently sized/spaced keys; however, the laptop-like design may take some getting used to for some.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 3.5/5



Everglide Ricochet

• Price: \$49.50 • Distributor: PCCaseGear www.pccasegear.com.au

Let's start by making it clear that this is certainly not your grandma's mouse mat. Well, unless your grandma happens to be a gamer, that is. This pad offers two surface sides - "smooth" and "rough" - as well as a non-fading surface. While the texture of these surfaces

should be fairly self-explanatory, this author's personal choice is the rough side, and it's deadly accurate when coupled with a set of mouse skates. The pad measures in at a surface dimension of 290 x 230 mm (11.40" x 9.06"). Simply put, this is the mousing surface of choice.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4.5/5
Performance: 5/5
Overall: 5/5



fUnc industries Surface 1030

• Price: \$59 • Distributor: PCCaseGear www.pccasegear.com.au

The fUnc pad is very similar to the Ricochet in that it has two sides - smooth and rough - but it also has a number of differences. Firstly, it comes with a handy mouse cord clip to prevent the cord from becoming caught on the edge of your desk whilst gaming.

However, it is also slightly smaller at 10"x8.5", does not include mouse feet (instead adopting a slightly less effective rubber base), and is slightly more expensive. While the fUnc is an excellent product, we'd still go with the Ricochet since it is both cheaper and larger.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4.5/5
Performance: 4.5/5
Overall: 4.5/5



Flexiglow Gamepad

• Price: \$39.96 • Distributor: Dick Smith Electronics www.dse.com.au

The Flexiglow gamepad's most unique feature is undeniably the glowing effect it emits, which can be customised to suit a number of tastes - 7 to be exact. Power is drawn from the USB port, while colour combinations can be selected using a small button located on the

pad itself. The pad features a black textured surface which is not rough or smooth, but somewhere in between. Overall, although it's as feature-rich as a mouse pad can get, its performance isn't as good as some of the other products.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 5/5
Performance: 3/5
Overall: 3.5/5



Xide-Pad II

• Price: \$39 • Distributor: PCCaseGear www.pccasegear.com.au

Much like the Flexiglow pad, the Xide-pad is illuminated; however, it only comes with a single LED - blue, red or green. Despite this lack of variety, we found that the illumination on the Xide-Pad was far stronger than that of the Flexiglow model, which may be of

even greater use to those that like to show off their wares at LAN parties. It was slightly disappointing to see that the LED can only be turned off by unplugging the device. As it's the lowest performing pad of the lot makes it easy for us to recommend the Flexiglow product over this pad.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3.5/5
Performance: 2/5
Overall: 2.5/5



RatpadzGS

• Price: \$29 • Distributor: PCCaseGear www.pccasegear.com.au

The Ratpadz is probably the most interesting mousing surface reviewed. The underside of the pad is purposely ribbed, so that pressure from your hand is distributed more evenly across all nine rubber feet, preventing slippage. All edges are rounded for

your comfort, while the fact that it is fairly thin helps the wrists from an ergonomics perspective. It's also the largest of the lot - ideal for those that like to use a low mouse sensitivity. While it isn't the best performer, it certainly comes close and is much more affordable.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3/5
Performance: 4.54/5
Overall: 4.5/5



Everglide Giganta Optical

• Price: \$45 • Distributor: GamerzStuff www.gamerzstuff.com.au

This pad is made from a very durable, hard plastic, and measures in at a sizeable 9.5" x 11.5" x 1/4". It's also got nice rounded edges, ensuring that you don't accidentally slit any wrists during a particularly fierce clan war. Additionally, the pad's "smoke" tint

means that it won't have a problem with optical mice, while its rough texture allows the Giganta to give both grippy and responsive performance. Despite these praises though, it's still not quite the mouse pad that the Ricochet is.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3.5/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 3.5/5



Everglide Gaming Mat

• Price: \$19 • Distributor: GamerzStuff www.gamerzstuff.com.au

The Everglide Gaming Mat comes in three different aesthetic designs - "Asian Swords", "Celtic Arms" and "Special Ops" - and measures in at a small-ish 8" x 10.5" x 1/16". The pad also features a .012" textured vinyl surface which sits on top of a 1/32" rubber base.

Overall, while it isn't likely to make you the next Fatal1ty, the Everglide Gaming Mat is the best gaming pad you'll find in this price range.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3.5/5
Performance: 3.5/5
Overall: 4/5



Steelpad 4S

• Price: \$74.95 • Distributor: GamerzStuff www.gamerzstuff.com.au

Many professional gamers have adopted the Steelpad as their surface of choice. Aside from setting you back a whopping \$75, the Steelpad 4S comes with a set of padsurfers (read: mouse skates), and a decently sized aluminium surface area of 290 mm x 257 mm x

2 mm. The pad is single sided with a smooth surface and eight mouse feet on its base in order to prevent slippage. Although the Steelpad 4S provides excellent performance that is on par with the Ricochet, its high price prevents it from taking pole position in this roundup.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4.5/5
Performance: 5/5
Overall: 4/5



Icemat

• Price: \$71.25 • Distributor: Sydney Metro Computers www.sydneymetrocomputers.com.au

The Icemat is unique in that it's the only mousing surface that's manufactured entirely of glass, resulting in an extremely smooth surface texture, and when coupled with the provided mouse skates, leaves you with a deadly combo that feels almost like you're gliding on

air. This isn't the largest pad featured in this roundup, but the highly smooth nature means that a larger pad isn't required, anyway. Our tests show that the Icemat's performance was just a tad below that of the Steelpad 4S, but if you like smooth pads, this is the one.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4.5/5
Performance: 4.5/5
Overall: 4/5



Logitech Dual Action Gamepad

• Price: \$39.10 • Distributor: TechBuy www.techbuy.com.au

As far as Logitech's gamepad lineup is concerned, the Dual Action sits at the lower end of the scale, targeted at gamers on a budget. However, don't let this throw you off, as although it lacks force feedback, it nonetheless boasts a handsome 12 buttons as well as a

comfortable, smooth design. While the pad played perfectly in most games, it would have been nice if the shoulder buttons were placed a little closer together, and if the analog sticks weren't so damn loose. But at a price of just \$50, it's certainly not a bad offering.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3.5/5
Performance: 3.5/5
Overall: 4/5



Thrustmaster FireStorm Dual Analog 3

• Price: \$39.95 • Distributor: Tech Pacific www.techpac.com.au

Being in a very similar price range and featuring almost identical functionality, the Firestorm 3 sits in direct competition with Logitech's Dual Action gamepad. As such, due to the fact that it includes an extra programmable button, force feedback and keyboard emulation,

we'd have to say that Thrustmaster's offering is the superior product. Furthermore, the faults we had with Logitech's pad were nowhere to be seen with the Firestorm 3, and due to the fact that both pads can be had for the same price makes choosing between the two a real no-brainer.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4/5
Performance: 4.5/5
Overall: 4.5/5



Thrustmaster Ferrari Enzo Racing Wheel

• Price: \$179.95 • Distributor: Tech Pacific www.techpac.com.au

An exact replica of that seen on the original Ferrari Enzo, this product reeks of perfection. It features life-like pedals that don't move about during use, boasts well-placed buttons, and is fully compatible with every game we tested. Among the wheel's many

functions are an 8-way D-Pad, 9 action buttons, two wheel mounted gear-shift levers and a very effective force feedback implementation. The only real complaint we had regarding the product is the lack of a gear shifting knob, and it's also a little flimsy.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 4/5



Logitech MOMO Racing Force

• Price: \$ 229.95 • Distributor: Logitech www.logitech.com.au

Like the Thrustmaster wheel, all buttons are logically placed and the rubber casing means that the wheel is extremely comfortable to use, even for long periods of time. Although the wheel only features six buttons on its face, we found that this did not have a significant

impact on game play in most games, and is further made up for by the inclusion of an ambidextrous gear knob. One area that the MOMO definitely owns the Enzo wheel is build quality - you won't find a sturdier steering wheel. If you can afford it, this is the wheel to own.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4.5/5
Performance: 5/5
Overall: 4.5/5



Everglide Mouse Bungee

• Price: \$28 • Distributor: GamerzStuff www.gamerzstuff.com.au

While we'd personally rather save \$28 and stick our mouse cords to the side of our monitors with a bit of Blue Tack, for those without such creativity, Everglide has created a product called the "Mouse Bungee". Put simply, the mouse bungee is a spring loaded

guide for your mouse cord, ensuring that it doesn't get caught on objects such as the edge of your desk resulting in smoother mouse movement and a greater level of precision. However, the same result can be achieved using Blue Tack, so why bother with this?

PCPP SCORE

Features: 3/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 2/5



Logitech Extreme 3D Pro

• Price: \$79.95 • Distributor: Logitech www.logitech.com.au

Now that Microsoft has decided not to make joysticks anymore, your choice of stick is now as limited as the number of free to air channels the Iraqis had before Snr Saddam took a vacation. Thankfully this reasonably priced offering is as good as any corded stick we've ever seen.

The twelve buttons on the stick are all in a sensible position, and are simple to program with the included key assignment software.

A rather sturdy feel suggests that this baby can handle a beating, although it is a little stiff. All in all a nice joystick at a very nice price.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 4/5



Logitech Freedom 2.4 Cordless Joystick

• Price: \$149.95 • Distributor: Logitech www.logitech.com.au

Don't you hate having to quickly yank your stick out from beside your PC on the rare occasions that you're lucky enough to score a jet or chopper in Desert Combat? In these occasions the Freedom 2.4 is a lifesaver, as its cordless nature makes quickly

setting up this stick a breeze. You'll need to whack three AAA batteries into the base of the stick, but these should last you around 50+ hours of gaming. While 50+ hours isn't bad, we'd much preferred for a rechargeable battery to be built into the base of the unit.

PCPP SCORE

Features: 4.5/5
Performance: 4/5
Overall: 4/5



Medion Multimedia PC Titanium MD 8080 XL

• Price: \$1,999 • Distributor: Medion (www.medion.com/au) • URL: www.medion.de/fullpopup/popup.html (no AU page)

This latest foray into the world of media PC's comes from Medion, which is actually a subsidiary of Aldi, the German chain of grocery stores. In fact, the default homepage of the Medion Media PC is www.aldi.com! Bring on the Coles branded PC!

Like many multimedia PCs, this unit is designed to be everything for everyone - media, gaming, work and web browsing, and aims to handle anything you can throw at it. To this end, it actually does a pretty good job, as the box is filled to the brim with gadgets and features, and most of them are quite high-end. It

from the benchmark results this machine is certainly no slouch.

The biggest concern, however, is that this unit attempts to perform well at everything, and specialise in nothing. For a work machine it's overpowered and overpriced, and features like the wireless LAN and card reader would be unnecessary and largely wasted. As a media centre it has everything you need, but it is quite dependant on the equipment you connect it to. The card has dual-head VGA output, as well as TV-OUT and S-Video, but strangely lacks DVI.

A major concern with this unit is the software configuration and

this unit is designed to be everything for everyone - media, gaming, work and web

features a P4 3GHz HT CPU, 512MB RAM, 128MB ATI RADEON 9800XL (a rare RADEON that is slightly slower than the 9800 PRO), 160GB Seagate HDD, DVD-ROM, DVD-RW, integrated 5.1 audio, wireless keyboard/mouse/remote control, 10/100Mb LAN plus 54Mb wireless LAN, 7 USB 2.0 ports, Firewire, TV Tuner, modem, a 4-in-1 card reader and Windows XP Home. You want it, it's got it. Possibly the only areas of concern are the motherboard, keyboard/mouse/remote, TV tuner and the modem, which are all Medion-branded products - very much unknown and untested in the world of computer hardware. Interestingly, it does not come with a floppy drive.

The bundled software is quite comprehensive - the media centre suite is Medion's own, but it also has standard DVD authoring/viewing bundles and Nero and Instant Copy for burning. For productivity it has the MS Works Suite. All software comes pre-installed.

The unit itself is quite eye-catching with a black and silver casing and matching peripherals, stealth doors over the DVD drives and a press-in, slide-down cover for the front panel. The case did strike us as fairly flimsy, though, and it's possible that prolonged use might result in breakage.

Regardless of all this high tech fluffery, the most important question is how does it rate as a gaming platform? We ran the box through a number of hoops using the out-of-the-box software configuration, and as you can see

support, which can be the bane of pre-built PCs. The default setup is quite messy, with lots of pre-installed applications which you may not want, including MusicMatch Jukebox and, urgh, AOL. During testing our fingers were itching to blow the image away and start from scratch. The support concerns stem from the fact that even though Medion is a worldwide company, and has offices in every major Australian capital, you will not find a product page for this unit on the Australian website at all. In fact, the only one we found was on the Medion Germany site and is, of course, in German.

Despite these concerns, there is no doubting that this is a fully-featured media station, and Medion (Aldi!) have done well in putting together a beast of a machine at a competitive price. Just make sure you can get decent local support.

James Bannan

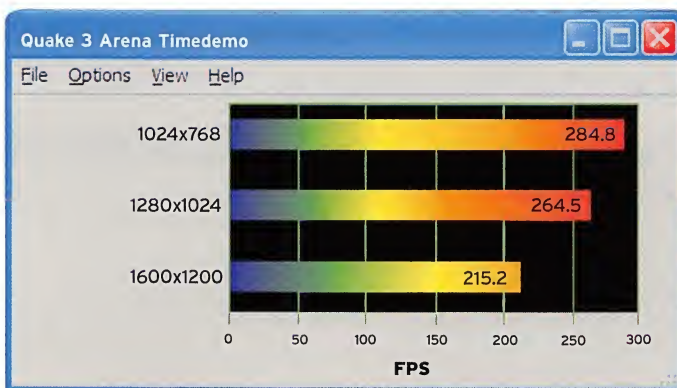
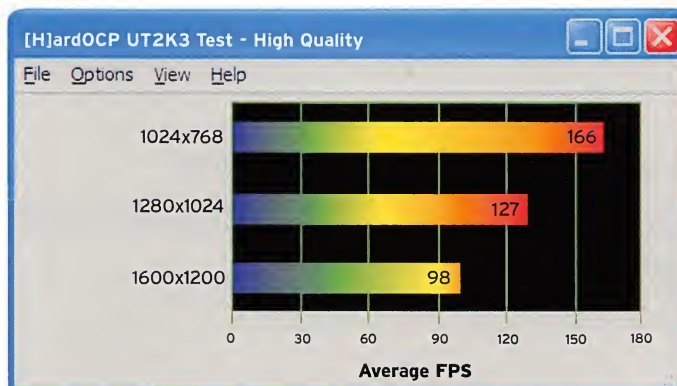
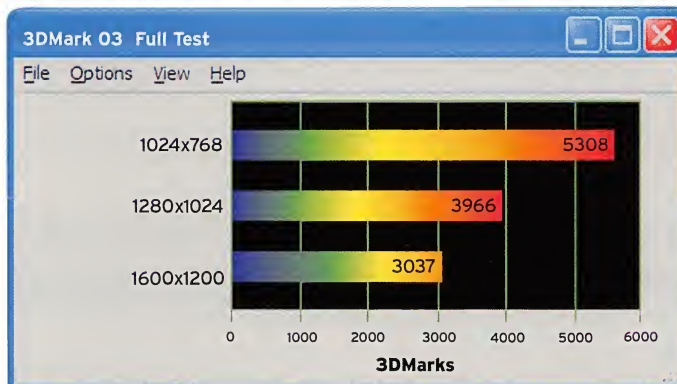
SPECIFICATIONS

- Pentium 4 3GHz with HyperThreading
- 512MB RAM
- 128MB ATI Radeon 9800XL
- 160GB Seagate 7200 HDD
- Pioneer DVD-RW
- Sony DVD-ROM
- Stereo TV/FM Tuner
- 7xUSB 2.0
- 2xFirewire
- 5.1 audio
- 10/100 LAN, 54Mb WLAN
- ConnectXL front panel with Flash card reader

PCPP Score

This unit is very comprehensive in terms of its capabilities, and can cope with any task required of it.

85



Gigabyte vs. MSI - GeForceFX 5950 Ultra Shootout

By now, everyone in the known universe is aware that the Radeon 9800XT, overall, is faster than the GeForceFX 5950 Ultra. Our shootout between the two chipsets in issue #95 is a testament to this. However, that certainly hasn't stopped people from remaining loyal to the Nvidia camp, nor has it made distributors think twice about supplying us with 5950-based products for review. Therefore, the show must go on.

We've recently received two more 5950 cards, this time of the Gigabyte and MSI variety, and

have decided to put them head-to-head in order to determine which will provide the best bang for your buck. As most of you will already know, due to the fact that both products are based on an identical chipset, run at identical clock speeds and feature 256MB of regular DDR memory, the performance difference between the two is likely to be negligible. Therefore, your purchasing decisions should be based around other aspects such as price, software bundle, overclocking and aesthetics. With that in mind, let's take a closer look.

MSI FX5950 Ultra-VTD256

• Price: \$799 • Distributor: MSI www.msicomputer.com.au

Upon removing MSI's GeForceFX 5950 Ultra from its packaging, it was the card's unique heatsink/fan design that first caught our attention. Split up into three separate copper heatsinks (one covering the GPU, one covering the memory chips and one attached to the underside of the card), MSI has been able to do away with the massive "dust buster" heatsink/fan of old, enabling it to reach a relatively level playing field with the virtually noiseless heatsink/fan units that ATI has enjoyed for as long as we can remember. Also found in the box is a very elaborate software bundle, consisting of Photoshop Album SE, 3D Album LE v2.03, InterVideo WinDVD 5.1 channel, a driver disc (obviously), WinDVD Creator Plus, MSI Media Center Deluxe II, Virtual Drive Professional and full version copies of Morrowind: The Elder Scrolls III, Ghost Recon and Duke Nukem

Manhattan Project, as well as a 7-in-1 games collection including titles such as The Sum of all Fears and IL2: Sturmovik. As you can imagine, this is without a doubt the most extensive software bundle we've seen packaged with a video card to date, re-affirming the idea that manufacturers need to differentiate their products in areas other than performance in order to capture maximum market share.

The card's feature-set mirrors that of its software bundle, including VIVO support through an external Philips 7108 TV codec, as well as TV out support provided by the GPU itself. Additionally, as is standard fare in today's graphics world, the card comes with both a VGA and DVI output, as well as a DVI-to-VGA adapter for those that own a dual VGA monitor setup. Finally, using PowerStrip we were able to overclock the card to a 515/510MHz core/memory clock speed, which is quite a significant increase over the default speed of 475/475MHz.

PCPP Summary

Plenty of features, awesome software bundle and a fair price. Recommended.

80

Gigabyte GV-N595U256V

• Price: \$769 • Distributor: Rectron www.rectron.com.au

While not as elaborate as MSI's offering, Gigabyte's software bundle somewhat makes up for this with the fact that it includes three newer and arguably more enjoyable game titles - Raven Shield, Will Rock and Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness - all of which allow users to reap the full benefits of their shiny new graphics cards straight out of the box. On the other hand, aside from Morrowind, the games that are included with the MSI card are far too dated to really stress the card at all. Having said that, however, when you take into account the plethora of other software included

in MSI's bundle, it's clear that MSI is superior in this respect.

As far as design and aesthetics are concerned, the card is almost identical to that of the reference board reviewed in issue #95, and therefore you should be fairly familiar with it. To re-hash, while DVI and TV-out are naturally supported, VIVO is nowhere to be seen, making this a fairly vanilla card in terms of feature-set. However, despite these weaknesses the card nonetheless managed to overclock all the way up to a core/memory clock speed of 535/520MHz, which is a decent increase over the MSI card, albeit, not exactly noticeable.

PCPP Summary

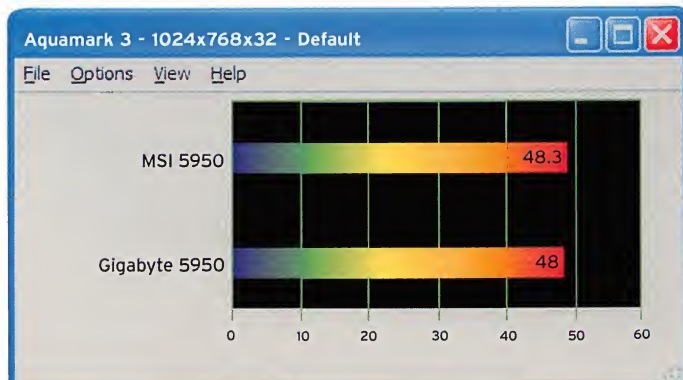
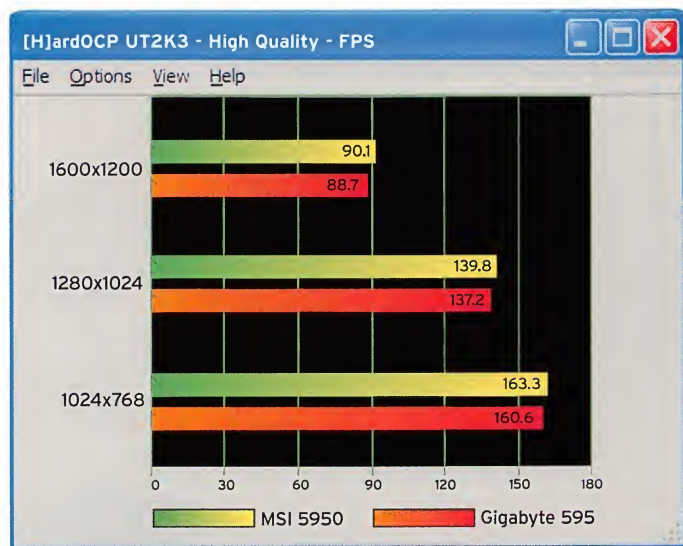
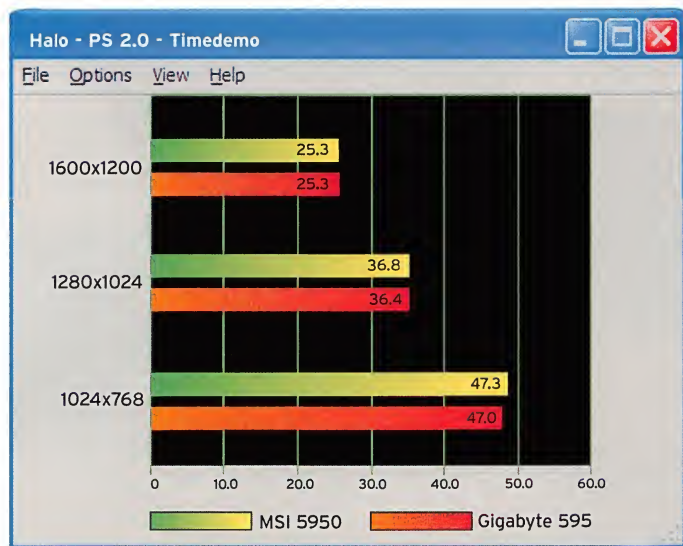
A solid product, however, its lack of VIVO and relatively inferior software bundle leave it a step behind MSI's offering.

71

Overall, while both cards are targeted at the same market, after examining the price and feature-set of each model, it's clear that the MSI card is a much more logical purchase. Specifically, although both cards performed virtually identically throughout testing (as expected), the MSI offering is

equipped with VIVO support (unlike the Gigabyte model), as well as a far superior software bundle. Therefore, the fact that both cards can be had for around the same price leaves us with no choice but to declare MSI as the winner of this shootout.

Asher Moses



Silent-Solution Kit

• Price: \$149 • Distributor: Anyware www.anyware.com.au • URL: www.fsp-group.com.tw

The Silent-Solution Kit from FSP is an answer to noisy computers but we're basically talking a fan solution here. The noise reduction is achieved by offering replacement components that are near-silent equivalents, for those which generate the most amount of noise. In some good packaging, with excellent instructions, there's a replacement CPU fan and heatsink ensemble, a Power Supply Unit and a case fan. The heatsink fan setup looks and feels solid with mounting paraphernalia for AMD and Pentium 4 processors. The fan is rated at less than 30 Decibels and is impossible to hear when tucked away in a case. It's thermal controlled and will move 30 cubic feet of air per minute at top speed – not bad at all. There's a solid copper base on the heatsink with aluminium fins on two sides and it did a better job than my stock AMD job by five degrees at idle. The case fan, rated at 0.1 Amp and

2250-3200 RPM, is near-silent as any fan rated at one-fortieth of a four Watt Sunon should be! This fan will push nothing like the air needed in crowded cases, small or large. But in combination with some phat, beefy Sunons on a switched rheostat, it will suffice; in a dinky office case it will be fine. The 350 Watts PSU is powder blue, neat and funky. There is

plenty of length in the cables with six Molex power connectors, a real Serial ATA power connector and the usual assortment of compulsory 12V, mainboard and accessory connectors. Critically, it's designed to move the air properly like an AMD and Intel approved PSU. The total power for the positive 3.3V and 5V rails together is a respectable 220W, anything less than 200W for gamers is just not cool. There

is also over-voltage and over-current protection and the short circuit safeguard should ensure no damage to the unit. As well as an on/off switch on the exposed rear, there's a knob to manually control the PSU fan speed. This kit is suitable for people who think that their PC may be a little too noisy.

Stuart Calvin

SPECIFICATIONS

- PSU: 350W maximum with 220W continuously available
- Serial ATA power connector and six Molex power connectors
- smart housing for peripheral power connectors
- Case Fan: dual ball bearing spindle
- 0.1W motor; 800-1500 RPM
- 17.1-21.4 CFM; 3-wire connector
- Heatsink/fan: suits Socket 478 Pentium and Socket 462 AMD processors
- 2250-3200 RPM
- 26.8-29.8 CFM



PCPP Score

An honest answer for noisy PCs at a good price.

89

VGA Silencer

• Price: \$32 • Distributor: arctic-cooling www.arctic-cooling.com/en/ • URL: <http://www.pccasegear.com>

The problem for system fan designers is to move sufficient air in near silence to cool whatever has to be cooled. Inside a PC case and more particularly, on a video card, size matters. The smaller the fan, the faster it must spin to move the same amount of air as something larger. I've seen some vendor implementations of GPU cooling that'd let a Swiss watch jewel movement heat up at the South Pole. Some better ASUS heatsink and fan setups will freeze liquid hydrogen but not many people really want a solution the size and weight of a small windowless building. A tiny, fast fan can be a noisy frucker, too. There are also poorly engineered stock coolers that'll fall off in your hand if you breathe too hard. If you have a perspex window in your custom rig then you'll want something funky, sexy and fully efficient for the LaN gurlZ to drool over. Enter the VGA Silencer from arctic-cooling. It's quiet, sexy,

funky, blue and very business like in its approach to cooling. It will, however, only cool the Graphics Processor and not any exposed memory modules on the adaptor as the heatsink contact foot stands about a centimetre proud of the Direct Heat Exhaust System (DHES). The exhaust system looks effective and seems to move substantial amounts of air with little effort. Mounting the Silencer requires a little tinkering on your part to dispose of the stock cooling system and rear bracket. You may have to create new mounting holes in some NVIDIA cards so that the ultra cool, neon-blue securing butterfly clip can be affixed with the built-in screw assembly. The

replacement rear bracket sports a switch for Ultra Quiet or eXtreme cooling options. The VGA Silencer is suitable for older ATI 9000-series adaptors and those GeForce 3 GTS based units, including Ti models and 9600 XT cards. The DHES will use the PCI bracket-space next to the ACP slot so if you're short on space then it's not for you. A fine solution for older and not so old cards without adequate (or sexy looking) cooling.

Stuart Calvin

SPECIFICATIONS

- Aluminium heatsink with full-length fins
- selectable cooling and noise level "absolute silence" or "uncompromising cooling performance"
- butterfly mounting clip



PCPP Score

Quiet, efficient, sexy and neon-blue, it's a steal at twice the price.

90





When you gotta game, you gotta game. Wherever. Whenever. So dump that gargantuan rig and pick up our effortlessly portable Super LANBOY. Its durable anodized aluminium body packs nine drive bays. Two 120mm fans. A clear side window. And with its free carrying strap, it's got everything you need for gaming on the go. Except an air freshener. To learn more about how our award-winning products can help you create your dream computer, visit www.antec-inc.com

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Import, Distribution, Service



MSI DR8-A DVD+R/+RW Writer



• Price: \$324 • Distributor: MSI Computer Australia <http://www.msi.com.au> • URL: www.msi.com.tw

The DR8-A is MSI's challenger for the high-speed, dual format DVD/CD writer market. Eight speed is only available for +R recording, the others are 4x DVD+RW rewriting; 4x DVD-R writing and 2x DVD-RW rewriting. No confusion please, read that again slowly because it's only the "plus", write-once format that burns up the bits at maximum speed. There are also respectable 40x CD-ROM and 12x DVD-ROM reading speeds. The high-speed 40x CD writing and 24x CD rewriting is handy too making the drive extremely versatile. There are also lower speeds supported for slower recordables and older PC CD-ROMs for compatibility but I had no difficulty rewriting at 24x. The DR8-A also supports a new specification called HD-BURN (High Density Burn). This writing technology can record twice the capacity of specified CD-R discs. Storing 1,400MB of data on a 700MB CD-R disc is a powerful

solution for cost saving as well as convenience. If you regularly back up copious amounts of data, files, movies, music, your boot drive or whatever and you've got your burning down to child's play, then eight-times speed is a godsend. I burned a 4.37GB data compilation with Nero Burning ROM using an assortment of DVD recordables kindly provided by Verbatim Australia. I also burned some

home movies and transcoded a few old John Wayne movie DVDs that played back in our two home DVD players. The front panel includes a Headphone Jack, Volume Knob, Emergency Eject Hole, LED Indicator (Writing: Red, Reading: Green), a Play Button and an Eject Button. The rear panel is arrayed with the usual power, IDE and audio connectors and there is also a Self-Test Jumper for those days when

things go wrong. The DR8-A writer bundle includes the popular software of Nero Burning ROM, PowerDVD, MyDVD and ShowBiz for film editing which allows you to enjoy the fun of being a movie director at home. The drive is versatile, quiet, and well priced for an 8x unit.

Stuart Calvin

SPECIFICATIONS

- BURN-Proof buffer underrun technology
- over-burn feature
- supports 99- (870MB) and 90-min (800MB) CD-R discs
- supports 8cm or 12cm discs
- 2MB buffer
- Horizontal and vertical operation
- supports optimum power control
- eight different formats and speeds
- HD-BURN™ records twice the capacity of CD-R media at 6x, 12x, 18x and 24x speeds

PCPP Score

A reliable and multitasking drive suitable for all users for all occasions.

91



TDK TS-150R Tremor

• Price: \$249 • Distributor: TDK (Australia) Pty Ltd www.tdk.com.au • URL: www.tdk.com.au

These TDK Tremor speakers are a neat looking 2.1 setup. There are two silver coloured, light-weight, flat panel satellites that can be desk or wall mounted, as well as the obligatory subwoofer. Apparently, there are "revolutionary" NXT-designed drivers that emanate sound in all directions, delivering a "huge sweet spot". No matter where you are in the room, a Tremor system is meant to "sound great". Unfortunately they don't. Speakers of this size (19mm) have to point at you, at ear level, because they are just not big and powerful enough to distort the air like a bigger speaker can. The Tremor subwoofer features a "Force Pipe" design that is basically a 10cm driver with a neodymium magnet unit at each end of a rolled-tube casing. It's not a true sub because there's no porting or venting to control roll-off from deep rumbles. The crossover and noticeable down mixing is not pleasing as it

punches out low frequency voice and what were obviously treble effects. The two-way bass reproduction is not as tight or controlled as I expected it should be for this price. At low volume, depending on the type of music, it can overwhelm the vocals and it's not kind to low-bitrate MP3s. Original, uncompressed stereo recordings are good enough for easy listening. For this sort of price, you're getting three separate input points, say, your PC by 3.5mm stereo mini-plug, a discman or cassette player by RCA

connectors and optical from a mini-disc. Changing your source is just one button away. An optical connection is a real bonus and this alone is responsible for a big slice of what seems a hefty price. One of the satellite bases is required for the remote function. It's still a cordless remote except the receiver is tied to a corded base-station - no big deal. I developed the best sound from the TS-150R by making extensive use

of mixer software. For movie testing I used PowerDVD and A Knight's Tale because of its fastidious sound effects and great music tracks. In-game sound reproduction was very good. Sadly, these just aren't speakers for music lovers.

Stuart Calvin

SPECIFICATIONS

- Full function remote control enables power on and off
- volume control, bass and treble adjustment as well as source selection
- Multiple channel amplifier for subwoofer (2 x 21W and 2 x 16.5W) and satellites (7W)
- Three selectable source inputs: RCA, 3.5mm mini-jack & optical

PCPP Score

Good enough for gaming and DVD movie playback. The three independent inputs are a real bonus.

65





Hmm....*Perfect!*

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The QUIETEST mini barebone of its kind.



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IcyQ Technology is the optimized cooling system. It coordinates the chassis, mainboard, fans and the power supply to ensure the best heat dissipation, noise reduction, and energy saving.

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Dual Raid



SL-865Pro-FGR

Intel[®] 865PE + ICH5

- FSB *1200 / 800 Mhz (*Overclocking)
- 4 Dual Channel DDR 400/333 SDRAM
- AGP 8X/4X
- UATA-133 IDE RAID (0,1,0+1) & Serial ATA RAID (0,1,0+1)
- Intel[®] 82547EI Gigabit Ethernet (via CSA)
- Integrated 6-Channel AC'97 Audio
- Integrated IEEE1394
- 8 x USB 2.0
- Supports Led Debug port
- BIOS Vcore Setting & FSB Setting
- BIOS AGP & DIMM Voltage Setting
- Hyper Threading Technology
- Soltek UV Technology

FSB 1200 Capable



SL-865PE-L

Intel[®] 865PE + ICH5

- FSB *1200 / 800 Mhz (*Overclocking)
- 4 Dual Channel DDR 400/333 SDRAM
- AGP 8X/4X
- UATA-100 & Serial ATA
- Integrated LAN function
- Integrated 6-Channel AC'97 Audio
- 8 x USB2.0
- BIOS Vcore Setting & FSB Setting
- BIOS AGP & DIMM Voltage Setting
- Hyper Threading Technology
- Soltek UV & MBA Technology

The PCB color is subject to change without notice.

PT880



SL-PT880E-RL

VIA[®] PT880 + VT8237

- FSB 800 / 533MHz
- 3 Dual Channel DDR 400/333 SDRAM
- AGP 8X
- Supports UATA-133/100 & Serial ATA
- Serial ATA RAID
- Integrated LAN
- Integrated 6-Channel AC'97 Audio
- 8 x USB 2.0
- BIOS Vcore Setting & FSB Setting
- BIOS AGP & DIMM Voltage Setting
- Hyper Threading Technology

Overclocking King



SL-75FRN2-RL

NVIDIA[®] nForce2 Ultra 400 + MCP

- FSB 400/333MHz
- 3 Dual Channel DDR 400/333 SDRAM
- AGP 8X/4X
- UATA-133/100 & Serial ATA RAID
- Integrated LAN
- Integrated 6-Channel AC'97 Audio
- 6 x USB2.0
- Chipset Voltage Adjustable
- BIOS Vcore Setting & FSB Setting
- BIOS AGP & DIMM Voltage Setting
- ABSII CPU Protection

The PCB color is subject to change without notice.

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Mirror Phase Plate



Aluminum Plate

Soltek Mini Barebone Systems

Intel[®] Pentium[®] 4 Solution
Qbic EQ3401 series
Intel Springdale 865G

Qbic EQ3402 series
Intel 845GE

AMD[®] Socket A Solution
Qbic EQ3702 series
NVIDIA nForce2 IGP

VIA[®] C3 CPU Embedded Solution
Qbic IQ3601/3602 Series
VIA CLE266
VIA C3 1000/800MHz CPU Embedded

*All brand names are registered trademarks of their respective owners. *Any overclocking is at user's risk, Soltek will not be responsible for any damage or instability to your processor, motherboard, or any other components.

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64 Hope St,
Sth Brisbane QLD 4101
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Fx: (07) 3017 2020
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U-Storage Mega Memory Watch

• Price: \$128 • Distributor: PC Case Gear <http://www.pccasegear.com> • URL: www.pccasegear.com/prod1060.htm



This is a stylish, silver watch with a black band, oh, and there's 128MB of built-in flash memory. The Memory Watch appears as a removable drive when it's plugged into a USB port of a computer. Initially, "dorky" sprang to mind but the street kids gave it a 'bAd' factor (meaning: excellent) of a gazillion. I carried around some MP3 songs and nonchalantly acknowledged the oohs and aahs as I plugged into various systems for instant-on music. The USB cable is securely integrated into the watch strap and hidden under the sliding loop with a USB extension cable also included in the package. A software CD provides options for clever partitioning and password protection of the stored data. The flash memory area may be partitioned into three types of disk and I'll use the following terms to describe this: Public Area, Security Area and Public Area Plus Security Area. In the

Public Area there is no security function at all. You can do any basic functions, including non-destructive partitioning, like store and retrieve data in this area; data can be any digital content you like, such as music, game patches or (eek!) homework and uni assignments. The Security Area cannot be viewed without the application software. Once you perform the login action in the application software, you can switch view from Public Area to Security Area. After a successful switch, you can again do any basic functions in this area but it's software protected. There are three partition combinations: 1) A single Public Area. 2) A Security Area and a Public Area with two partitions in the same disk Logical Unit Number or LUN. 3) A

Public Area Plus Security Area. In this third configuration, you can build the device area into three partitions in two LUNs: Public Area and Security Area in LUN0, and Public Area in LUN1. You can access these partitions using the multiple-LUN driver. In essence, you can only view either "Public Area" or "Security Area" at the same time in the same disk LUN - very handy indeed. It can also

be made bootable if you desire. Lots of useful features for people who want more than just plain storage and the watch isn't half bad either.

Stuart Calvin

SPECIFICATIONS

- 128MB
- USB connection

PCPP Score

An inexpensive but reliable watch and data storage combination.

90



Creative NOMAD MuVo_ 1.5GB

• Price: \$479 • Distributor: Creative • URL: www.nomadworld.com/products/muvo_2_15



Price: In last month's PowerPlay we did a mammoth MP3 player roundup, but this little jockey from Creative didn't arrive in time. It's a pity, as it would have done very well compared to the competition. What's so special about it? Well, how does 1.5GB capacity jammed into a package 6.5cm by 6.5cm sound to you?

If you can think of a feature that you'd want in an MP3 player, this thing probably has it. USB 2.0 connectivity means you'll be able to fill up the 1.5GB storage space in no time, and if you're running Windows XP you can kiss your drivers goodbye. It's also quite happy to lug your files around as a mobile hard drive, and a four band graphic equaliser means you'll be able to tweak the sound quality to your ear's delight. Speaking of sound quality, thanks to an impressive signal to noise ratio of 98dB this player is as good as it

gets, and it's got a hefty amount of volume, ready to pummel your ear drums into submission. Surprisingly, the included ear buds are actually of a decent quality, so you won't need to worry about blowing another fifty bucks on a new set.

A rechargeable Lithium Ion battery is also included, and this should keep the tunes pumping for around 10 hours. Thankfully this is removable, so when it gives up the ghost in a couple of years replacement should be a pain free procedure, unlike certain other popular MP3 players *cough* Apple *cough*.

While it all sounds rosy in MuVo land, this unit does have a couple of problems. First and

foremost is the price - for an extra hundred dollars you can pick up a 10GB MP3 jukebox, but it won't be anywhere near as small or light as this unit. The other problem is the switch that is used to navigate through the options and playlists; it's simply too small and you'll often accidentally select the wrong option.

Regardless of these minor qualms, we ended up being most impressed by this little player. Put simply, you won't find a better sounding unit of this size that has so much capacity. Well, until the new mini-iPod hits shelves that is...

Bennett Ring

SPECIFICATIONS

- 1.5GB storage capacity
- Lithium Ion rechargeable battery
- USB 2.0
- carry case

PCPP Score

A fine MP3 player that packs a surprisingly large punch considering its miniscule size. Slightly pricey though.

88





AUDIO with ATTITUDE!

VS • 4121

2.1 Clarity

- Unique, down-firing midrange driver fills the room with rich, accurate sound - you'll enjoy clear mids anywhere in the room.
- Specially engineered Micro drivers reproduce highs with thrilling clarity.
- Feel shakes and quakes from the front-firing, 6.5" long-throw subwoofer.

**NEW
MODEL!
\$149.95 RRP**



**REVIEW
COMMENT**

"...the Altec Lansing VS4121 system seemed the most musically-gifted of the lot."
- Tom's Hardware Guide, Nov 2003

Altec Lansing 2004 Speaker Range!

Listen to the crystal clear sounds and bone thumping bass generated by these speaker systems and you will understand why Altec Lansing is the #1 computer speaker brand in the world!

Visit www.alteclansing.com today for the full features, benefits and specifications on the awesome range of Altec Lansing Speakers.

If you're serious about sound, call your local distributor or your local retail outlet so you can experience the clarity and power of the Altec Lansing range.



MX • 5021

2.1 THX Certified

- Enjoy THX Certified cinema quality sound.
- Two mid-range drivers with polypropylene cones for more responsive, less distorted sound.
- Horn loaded tweeters for wider sound dispersion.
- Wireless Remote and control pod.
- Classy Piano finish exterior.

**NEW
MODEL!
\$399.95 RRP**



MX • 6021

2.1 in-Concert Technology

- The fusion of pro audio line-array and tri-amp technologies, Altec Lansing's InConcert uses three separate amplifiers to power 12 high-performance, full-range Micro Drivers. A frequency filtering system beams intense, concentrated audio straight out. You've never heard audio like this!
- Crisp, clean sound feels like it's being directed right at you, without reverb from floors and ceilings.
- Whether you're sitting in front of the speakers or several feet away, you'll hear every nuance of sound.
- Wireless Remote and Control Pod.
- Low frequency bass with a 6.5" ported subwoofer in a low-resonance wooden cabinet.
- Looks great with LCD display's and notebook screens.

**NEW
MODEL!
\$499.95 RRP**



Just listen to this!

www.alteclansing.com



Multimedia
Technology

Victoria



South Australia



West Australia



Queensland



New South Wales



All States

Harvey Norman

All States

Bennett Ring Powertools

While it would make our jobs a heck of a lot easier if we could review hardware based on the shininess of the packaging it arrives in, we're pretty sure our beloved readers are a little more interested in how the hardware actually performs. Which is why we have the PC PowerPlay PowerTools - batteries not included.

If you're anything like us, you probably don't give a rat's arse if Word will open three seconds faster on the new

Pentium 64, or if you can compress a zip file more speedily using DDR6-8000 memory. Nope, this is PowerPlay, so it's all about how well your games will perform.

Our PowerTools are broken into two categories, videocard tests and CPU/motherboard/memory tests, and you'll notice that most of these are based on real world game engines. We spoke to Intel, AMD, NVIDIA and ATI about which games to use to benchmark our hardware, and

after tossing out their biased recommendations settled on the following applications for the majority of our tests. Of course, every now and then a unique piece of hardware will arrive that can't be tested properly using these applications, and in these circumstances we'll use the most appropriate benchmarking software.

We also use test benches (a fancy way of saying a PC outside of a case, waiting to electrocute unsuspecting

hardware newbs), standardised hardware platforms that ensure our benchmark results can be compared to each other month after month.

This month sees the introduction of a couple of DX9 benchmarks, and surprisingly enough both ATI and NVIDIA agreed that these were the two tests to use. So please give a hearty welcome to both Aquamark 3 and HALO - the latest members of our beloved PowerTools.

CPU Tests

3D Mark03 CPU test

Nobody can deny that this CPU test is a nice way to give processors a thorough workout. And hey, it's easy to use and free - 'nuff said.

Jedi Knight 2

We couldn't ignore a benchmark that includes lightsabres. We run this test at low resolution (640x480), with texture details lowered, and geometry details maxed out.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test 2.1

We run the CPU test of this benchmark at low resolution, and it's one of the finest indicators of CPU performance available.

Comanche 4

It sucked as a game, but as a CPU/motherboard/memory benchmark this is a beauty. We run at 640x480 resolution to make sure it's the CPU that's carrying the load.

Videocard tests Aquamark 3

There ain't nothing sexier than pixel

shaders baby, and this benchmark uses a wad of DX9 shaders. You can almost hear your video card squeal in pain when running this test.

3DMark2001 SE v330

An excellent DirectX 8.1 benchmark, we're still waiting for games to look this bloody good. Unlike its newer sibling, 2001SE doesn't have a reputation for being incredibly biased. We run this at the same resolutions as the Q3A test.

HALO

Considering this was a port from the NVIDIA powered Xbox, we were quite surprised to see ATI give this DX9 benchmark the thumbs up. Which is fine by us, as this is one game that will seriously test even the fastest of video cards.

[H]ardOCP Unreal Tournament 2003 test

Crank up the resolution and set the benchmark to High Quality mode, and you've got a test that will bring both ATI and NVIDIA products to their knees. This is also the test that we use for anisotropic filtering and anti-aliasing tests.

TEST BENCHES

Intel Test Bench (x2) Intel Pentium 4 2.6C

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO
www.akatech.com.au

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL
DDR400
www.altech.com.au

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB
ATA100 Hard Drive
www.seagate.com

ABIT IS7 865PE motherboard
www.altech.com.au

TOPOWER 470W PSU
www.auspcmarket.com.au

Mitsubishi Diamond View
2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com.au

Microsoft multimedia keyboard
and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au

Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

AMD Test Bench (x1) AMD Athlon XP 2600+

HIS RADEON 9700 PRO
www.akatech.com.au

Corsair 2 x 256MB XMS3200LL
DDR400
www.altech.com.au

Seagate Barracuda 7200.7 160GB
ATA100 Hard Drive
www.seagate.com

ABIT NF7-S
www.altech.com.au

TOPOWER 470W PSU
www.auspcmarket.com.au

Mitsubishi Mitsubishi Diamond
View 2115e 21" monitor
www.mitsubishi.com

Microsoft multimedia keyboard
and optical mouse
www.microsoft.com.au

Windows XP Professional
www.microsoft.com.au

Image Quality testing:

We also use a Sony G520 21" CRT monitor for the image quality testing of video cards.



www.akatech.com.au



www.corsairmicro.com



www.auspcmarket.com.au



www.intel.com



www.abit.com.tw



www.amd.com



www.seagate.com



www.hightech.com.hk



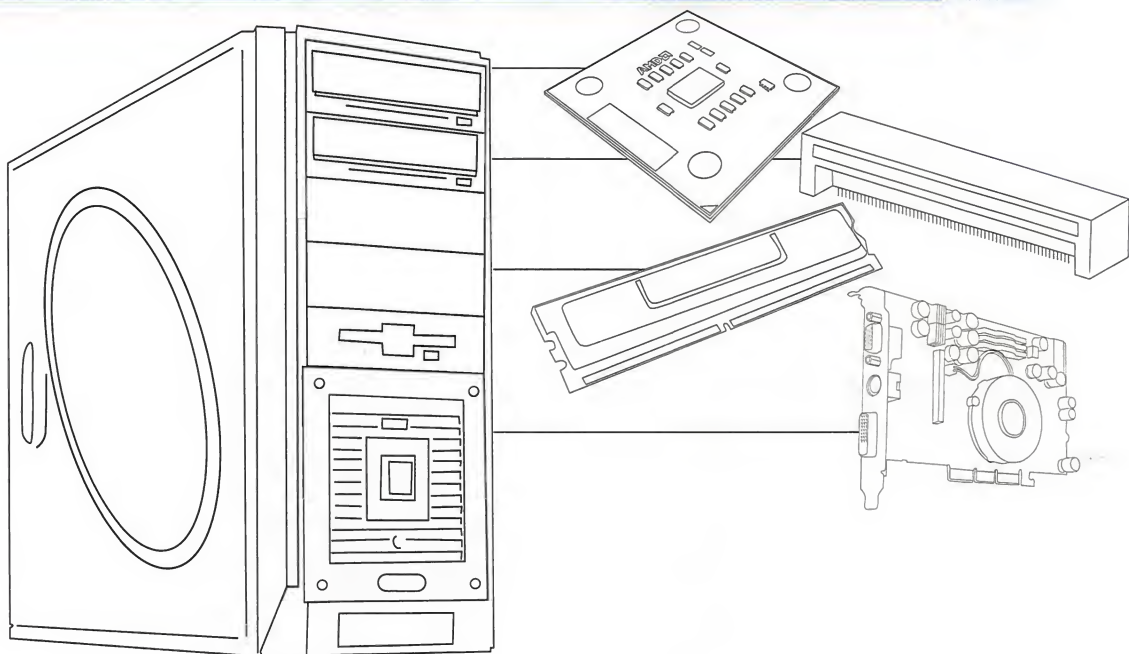
www.altech.com.au



Stuart Calvin

Decrypt

System boards are the bedrock of computing. They are better known as Motherboards, from the days when Daughter Cards were used to add functionality like more memory or network features. These days the extent of embedded and integrated functionality is mind boggling. A motherboard can cost as little as \$120 for a basic unit or \$500 plus for a fully featured rip-snorter. So what should you look for and what is actually on the board?



AC'97 Codec: Audio Codec '97 defines a high-quality, 20-bit audio architecture for the PC that is used in the majority of motherboards. Multi-channel on-board sound like the Realtek ALC655/8 is typical of the standard, with 5.1 channels no further away than some retail cables and speakers. There are also new Jack-Sensing features so you won't have to worry about how to hookup the speakers.

AGP8X: Accelerated Graphics Port - Eight Times is the latest generation video interface specification with high bandwidth speeds up to 2.12GB/s. With a bus speed of 533MHz, AGP8X is theoretically twice as fast as AGP4X.

Bus Master IDE ports: a pair of UltraDMA 133/100/66 connectors for hard-drives are as standard as two nostrils except you can connect up to four devices including CD/DVD devices. ATA/UDMA133 (theoretically 133MB/s) is as fast as a hard-drive will go on current technology, however, ATA100 is more common. Busmastering devices bypass the CPU for routine activity.

CPU Socket: The Central Processing Unit Socket is the physical way that a processor connects onto the motherboard. There's a Socket A for the ageing crop of AMD Athlon/Duron processors and a different Socket 940 for the new AMD Athlon64 FX and Opteron 100 models. There is also Socket 754 for the new Athlon 64. The Intel Pentium 4 and Celeron processors require the Socket 478. The Pentium III and older Celerons use the Socket 370.

Dual Channel: Is a memory architecture for Double Data Rate memory (DDR). In theory, a pair of memory sticks doubles the bandwidth of your system memory and hence boosts the system performance, but that's 'in theory'.

Ethernet: Integrated 10/100 Megabits per second controllers for Local Area Networks are now just about standard and a must for gamers. More recently, Realtek are offering their 8110S Gigabit Ethernet controller (1000Mbps), good enough for double the real world speeds of 10/100 Ethernet. Intel offer their Communication Streaming Architecture interface for Gigabit Ethernet which pledges to avoid the 33MB/s barrier of 32-bit PCI solutions.

ICH: The In/Out Controller Hub manages the Integrated Peripherals available on the motherboard. If the MCH is a Formula 1 engine, the ICH provides for the Holden and Rolls-Royce options. The motherboard manufacturers implement various combinations of integrated features depending on the proposed market segment and price-point they wish to exploit. All of the Integrated Peripherals make use of "controllers" to take a load off the CPU.

IEEE1394b FireWire: The little "b" in 1394, courtesy of Texas Instruments, is designed to double the 400 Megabits per second (50MB/s) of the original standard for consumer peripherals like burners and cameras.

Internal I/O Connectors: These connections, found on the board itself, are the physical "user-plays" manifestations of the ICH feature controllers, described above, as well as the MCH controlled CPU Socket, AGP and memory slots. You'll find USB and IEEE1394 pin headers for your consumer Audio/Video appliances, storage

peripherals and portable devices. The optical or coaxial Sony/Philips Digital Interconnect Format (S/PDIF) input/output pin header and CD/AUX connector for sound are also on the board as is the floppy port (duh!). Maybe a Game Port pin header and, most importantly, look for at least three cooling fan pin headers!

MCH: The Memory Controller Hub, determines the speeds of the Front Side Bus, memory and graphics as well as managing their configuration. The Intel i875 chipset MCH supports 800 and 533MHz FSB speeds, fast memory and enormous graphics bandwidth. AMD processors similarly require 400 and 300MHz FSB support for their Barton and Athlon processors. The AGP 2.0/3.0 standards and 2x/4x/8x capabilities are tied up here as well. Integrated graphics is also a feature of the MCH, however, this is strictly for the weenies.

RAID: Redundant Array of Inexpensive (or Independent) Disk controllers, simply provide for four more disks (JABOD - Just a Bunch of Disks) or they can be paired for Mirroring or Striping to safeguard data or increase performance. Promise and Highpoint, among others, manufacture these controllers.

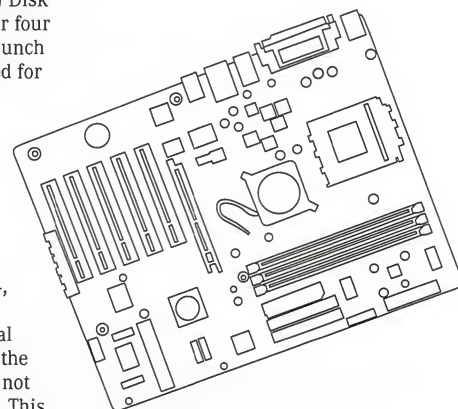
Serial ATA: Controllers like the Silicon Image Sil3124, offer the flexibility of accommodating the new Serial ATA storage interface even if the core logic chipset (ICH) does not have Serial ATA functionality. This

latest chip supports a 4-Port PCI-X Host. Using native architecture, throughput speeds approaching the full 150MB/s can be realised.

SCSI: More lately an Adaptec Small Computer Systems Interface chipset can be found on consumer boards allowing a real mix of disk standards in a PC. SCSI disks are more expensive but tend to be more reliable and more than a dozen can be chained on the one port.

USB 2.0: Universal Serial Bus (revision 2) is a competing standard to FireWire. Currently, the USB Specification covers three speeds 480 Mbps, 12 Mbps, and 1.5 Mbps. The term "Hi-Speed USB" refers to just the 480 Mbps portion of the USB Specification. We now use the term "USB" to refer to the 12Mbps and 1.5Mbps speeds.

ZIF Socket: A Zero Insertion Force Socket enables you to insert and remove a processor without special tools.



THE BEAST



In association with Altech Computers

Welcome to PCPP's Beast page, where we give you the blueprints for three very different PCs, each catering to a different wallet thickness and/or level of technical knowledge.

For those with extra phat, well padded money holders, look no further than the Beast. You'll be hard pressed to find a faster machine, but you'll pay through the nose for the privilege. Then there's the Mutant, for those who don't mind a bit of tinkering and overclocking. It offers the best balance between price and performance. Finally we have the Beastie. Cheap it may be, but slow it certainly is not.



CPU, MEMORY AND MOTHERBOARD

AMD Athlon FX-51 CPU

Goodbye Intel, hello AMD. The FX-51 is bloody expensive, but the fact that it's the fastest gaming processor around meant we had no choice but to fit out The Beast with this speed demon.

\$1258 www.amd.com



Asus SK8N

Yep, it's one incredibly expensive motherboard, but that's what you have to put up with when you want the best of the best. At least you'll know that it's of the highest quality.

\$412 www.abit.com.tw



1GB Corsair TWINX-3200 ECC Registered

The FX-51 demands only the finest in registered memory, and a Gig of the stuff for a mere \$630 is quite simply a bargain. It's Corsair as well, so it must be pretty good, right?

\$490 www.corsairmemory.com



Zalman 7000A-Cu

The Beast is so chunky, so wild and untameable that you need a real man's cooler stuck on the top of your mighty CPU. Zalman delivers, offering a chunk of metal that performs well and isn't too screamingly loud.

\$79 www.zalman.co.kr



Antec TruePower 550W

With 550 watts of blistering power you can plug in as many crazy case fans, cooling systems and front-mounted LCD panels as you like and still enjoy smooth, reliable gaming.

\$200 www.antec-inc.com



VIDEO, AUDIO AND CONNECTIVITY

XpertVision RADEON 9800XT PRO 256MB

With more onboard memory than some people's whole PC, the latest in the RADEON family will get your FSAA performance up and keep it up.

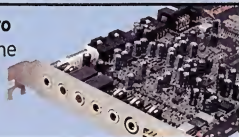
\$770 www.xpertvision.com.tw



Creative Soundblaster Audigy 2 ZS Platinum Pro

The most powerful consumer-level soundcard on the market. Support for every sound format, including Dolby 6.1 surround.

\$499 australia.creative.com



Creative Inspire 6600 6.1

Let your soundcard handle all the decoding and plug these cheap but powerful speakers into the ports on the back. An extra rear channel beefs your gaming surround!

\$264 australia.creative.com



STORAGE AND OPTICAL

Sony DRU510A DVD +/- R/RW

Almost but not quite cheap enough for mere mortals to own, this Sony drive will burn DVDs and CDs at 4X and 24X respectively - tasty!

\$299 www.sony.com.au



Samsung 816BRPS 16x DVD-ROM

It's straight up and down, it's cheap, it's fast, it works well and you need it to copy - sorry, back up - DVDs using your nifty writer.

\$62 www.samsung.com.au



2x Seagate 200GB Serial ATA in RAID 0

Thanks to the SK8N's support for Serial ATA RAID, you can run your 400GB in super-fast RAID 0 mode for even quicker load times - and to be damn cool too, of course.

\$612 www.seagate.com



DISPLAY, INPUT AND COSMETICS

21" Sony FD Trinitron G520

Until large LCD catches up with small LCD the Beast will stick with dependable, mature, established CRT. And the G520 is one of the best in the business.

\$1960 www.sony.com.au



MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Keyboards and mice don't get much snazzier than this delectable combo.

\$210 www.microsoft.com.au



Antec P160

This beast of a case is perfect for a beast of a PC. A couple of temperature gauges on the front make it perfect for letting you know when your system is about to explode.

\$250 www.antec-inc.com



BEAST VALUE:

\$7365

THE MUTANT

Thanks to the popularity of overclocking and tweaking, we've included this machine to show you exactly what you can get away with for not much outlay. Tweaked to within an inch of its life, this is the machine we DO own, versus the Beast, which is the machine we'd like to be able to AFFORD to own.

Intel P4 2.6GHz "C" at 3.3GHz

Truly the most overclockable of all modern CPUs, the 2.6C can be run a staggering 700MHz over its stock speed. With the standard Intel HSF. Now that's value. \$300 www.intel.com



Abit A17

An 865PE based mobo from Abit, the A17 has a very handy feature in that you can overclock your system directly from the Windows desktop. Which means you needn't delve into the confusing BIOS options ever again. \$195 www.abit.com.tw



MS Wireless Optical Elite Desktop Pack

Sure, this combo isn't exactly cheap, but you can't skip on the interface between you and your box of love. And it's all wireless, making it perfect to use from the comfort of your couch. \$257 www.logitech.com.au



Antec TrueControl 550W

What could be groovier than a PSU that comes with a 5.25" front plate with dials and knobs for controlling fan speed plastered all over it? Nothing, that's what. \$210 www.antec-inc.com



Antec PlusView 1000AMG

An excellent pre-modded case, with more than enough fan mounts to keep your oc'd system nice and chillin'. And with this machine, you'll definitely make the most of the side window. \$171 www.antec-inc.com



1GB Corsair TWINX-3200C2

Damn memory is getting cheap. Who'd have thought a year ago that you could now pick up a gig of ridiculously fast DDR-RAM for a mere \$377? Not us, that's for sure. \$377 www.corsairmemory.com



XpertVision RADEON 9800XT

Amusingly, the video card is the single most expensive component of the Mutant. It's hard to believe that you can now get a RADEON 9800XT for a mere \$770, considering just how blazingly fast this video card is. \$770 www.xpervision.com.tw



Zalman VGA Heatpipe Cooler 80C-HP

Bolt this mighty thing to your video card, attach the included fan, and who knows what insane core speeds you can achieve? \$68 www.zalman.co.kr



120GB Seagate IDE

The first upgrade HDD I ever bought was 6GB and cost \$447. So this is pretty damn cheap. Only standard IDE, but at this price we can't complain. \$146 www.seagate.com



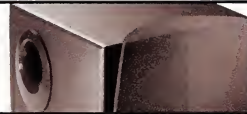
Creative SB Audigy

Lacks a few of the features found on the Audigy 2, but only the ones that don't really have much effect on gaming. There's a lot of soundcard here for not much cost. \$129 australia.creative.com



Creative Inspire 6.1 6600

They're so cheap they're good enough for the Mutant too. No decoder, no difficult optical inputs, just ordinary wires plugging in to a set of extraordinary speakers. \$249 australia.creative.com



Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM

Same as the Beast, this drive is fast, dependable and has a slightly funkier facade than most of the beige monstrosities currently available. \$62 www.samsung.com.au



Samsung 252BRNS 52x24x52 CD-RW

Wow, these things sure got cheap didn't they? Burn CDs in hardly any time at all thanks to 52x writing. Backup all your digital LAN shots for posterity. Pose nude... no wait, don't. \$59 www.samsung.com.au



19" Samsung 995 Dynafit

Cheaper than the video card but still a lot of sleek, flat monitor. Nineteen inches is pretty much the minimum for decent gaming, and we can't wait until a 16ms LCD this big costs this much. \$545 www.samsung.com.au



4x Antec Internal Illuminate

Pep up the Mutant with a few light sticks. Stick 'em on the monitor, in the case, wherever you like. USB powered and respond to sound - clap on, clap off! Other cosmetic additions to the Creature are limited only by your imagination. \$176 www.antec-inc.com



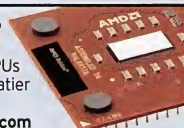
MUTANT VALUE: \$3665

the beastie

The cheapest but worthiest PC of all, the Beastie is for all of us who need gaming, the web and to generally have fun without worrying about overclocking or our bank account.

AMD-Athlon XP 2500+ Barton

The cheapest CPUs keep getting meatier and meatier \$146 www.amd.com



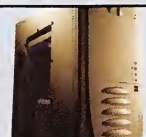
Abit NF7

nForce2 is good and this implementation of it is even better www.abit.com.tw \$132



Antec Lanboy

Includes a 350W power supply, window and carry strap. \$180 www.antec-inc.com



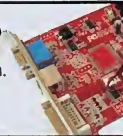
512MB Corsair PC-3200

A budget PC with half a gig of RAM. All praise the open market. \$220 www.corsairmemory.com



GeCube RADEON 9800

Yes, a 9800 in a budget system. Holy shit batman. \$445 Available from www.emagen.com.au



80GB Seagate IDE

Plenty of room for not much cash. Dependable and reliable. \$110 www.seagate.com



Creative Inspire 2500 2.1

Plug 'em in to the nForce2's onboard sound and it's MP3-tastic! \$119 australia.creative.com



Samsung 816BPRS 16x DVD-ROM

Good enough for all the PCs on this page, swift and reliable. \$62 www.samsung.com.au



Samsung 252BRNS

52x24x52 CD-RW Cheap, fast, reliable, what more could you want from a CD-RW? \$59 www.samsung.com.au



17" Samsung SyncMaster 753S

To think flat screen 17" monitors were once worth \$800. I love the future. \$226 www.samsung.com.au



MS Internet Value Pack

Not content with owning your OS world, MS are now ruling the I/O roost. \$64 www.kmepc.com

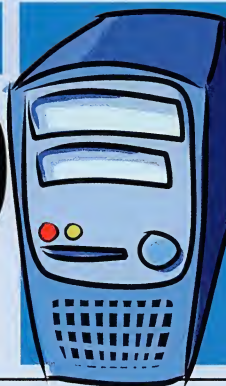


beastie value: \$1763

So, you want one of these three fine beasts? Luckily, all of these components are available at **Altech Computers** www.altech.com.au 02 9735 5655



SETUP



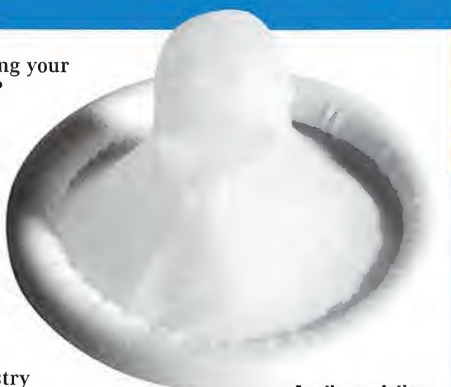
WRITE TO SETUP AT:

Setup
PC Powerplay
78 Renwick St
Redfern
NSW 2016

setup@pcpowerplay.com.au

STU'S TIP!

Having trouble installing your new vid or sound card? Sick of the "Data is Invalid" message? This error is due to a protection problem in the Windows registry and occurs with a variety of drivers. To fix this problem, go to Start, Run... and type "regedit" without the quotes to run the Registry Editor. Navigate to



Another solution
to your protection problems

HKEY_LOCAL_MACHINE/SYSTEM/CurrentControlSet/ENUM/PCI/

and you will see a number of keys of the form "VEN_xxxx", where xxxx are strings like "1102&DEV_0004&SUBSYS_00011103&REV_04". Under each of these folders will be another folder with a long numerical name. Open each

folder and look for the "DeviceDesc" which matches the hardware you are trying to install. Right Click on the "VEN_xxxx" for that device and select "Permissions" and then tick "Allow for Full Control". Close Regedit and then continue with the installation of your device.

SOUND OF SILENCE

Q I was hoping you would be able to get my sound working for games on a new system running Win98SE. I gave up on the idea of running games under WinXP! I play Doom, Quake, Hexen, Duke3D etc. They play well and have sound effects but no music. My sound is onboard VIA3059 using 5.1 and the ALC650 codec. How do I find the resources this chip will use and then set it up in these games?

Wayne S

A Not only do you have to enable on-board sound in the BIOS but you will need to enable "Legacy Sound" or something similar as well; keep the defaults and use your mixer software to output stereo 2-speaker sound. You will need Win98 drivers which should be on the motherboard installation disc and the vendor's website. Resource

information is found in Device Manager in the context menu for hardware and the correct settings should also be in your documentation. I recommend you persevere with XP since I still play all these games myself in XP Pro.

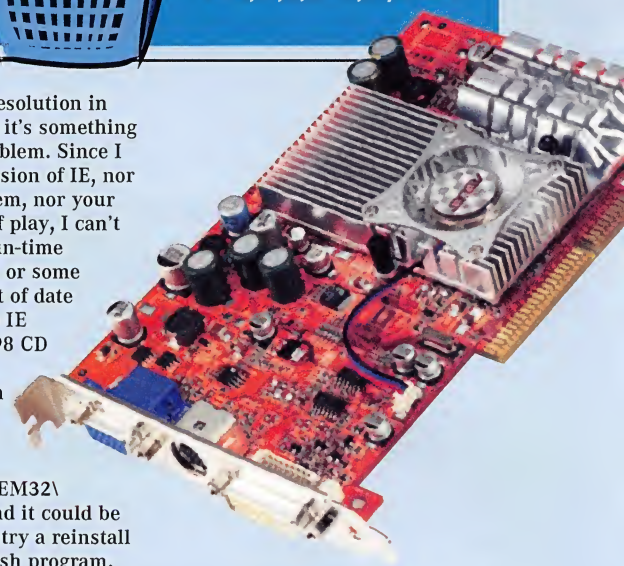
BROWSE THIS!

Q My crazy browser is starting to crash randomly on me. It goes: Access violation at address 0392CFD3 in module 'Flash.ocx' read of address 0000004C than you click ok and it goes: Access violation at address 77D445BD in module 'USER32.dll'. Writ of address 77D6CC7e

Jinto

A Bummer dude. The file USER.dll is responsible for many things and its API Call List is as long as your arm (the things it can do like "Check and Change

the current Video Resolution in run time"). Usually, it's something else causing the problem. Since I don't know your version of IE, nor your operating system, nor your Service pack state of play, I can't say whether your run-time libraries are at fault or some Java or that IE is out of date - if you're using the IE version off the Win98 CD then certainly it can't handle modern browser work. The file Flash.ocx is found in C:\WINDOWS\SYSTEM32\Macromed\Flash\ and it could be corrupt - you could try a reinstall of Macromedia's Flash program. Check for and remove any ActiveX Controls marked "damaged". (Explorer > C:\WINDOWS\Downloaded Program Files). You can tell by selecting "View > Details" on the toolbar. Just right click and remove any damaged files or duplicates. Microsoft KB Article 302396 may also help. Alternatively, grab a PC magazine cover CD and reinstall IE (v-5.5 should be the minimum).



BUDGET PURCHASE

Q Hi, I'm trying to decide what video card to get for my new PC. It'll mainly be a gaming PC. I don't want to spend too much on a flashy video card, so what would u recommend in terms of price, performance and value? Also, I'm not sure whether or not 1GB of RAM is worth the extra expense over 512MB. What do you think?

Shane Cheung

A As always, scrutinise the PCPP video card reviews and check out the street prices on razorprices.com. Have a close look at a Radeon Pro near your price limit, maybe the 9600?

OONSE OONSE

Q Hi again. just wondering if I am gonna get a reply by email or whether I'm gonna have to wait until PCPP March edition before I find out the answer. I have a LeadTek nForce mobo, Athlon 2600+, 1024MB RAM, GF4 Ti4200 graphics card, Genius soundcard and 5.1-ch on-board sound. Is it possible to hook your PC up to a stereo? As in a Hi-Fi midi system for example..

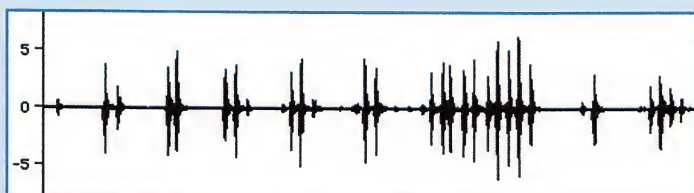
Druss

A Yes and you only need readily available consumer cables to connect it all. Since you mention stereo, you'll probably need a 3.5mm mini-jack from the sound card Line-out to an RCA pair for the Hi-Fi unit. Hmm, what month is it now? Enjoy!

STU'S TIP!



"wErD, my game won't run"! First check the minimum hardware requirements of the game. CoD on an MX400 and Celeron 300 with 64MB of RAM is insanity. Install the latest video drivers and check the Internet updates for motherboard chipset drivers as well. Check the publisher's website for official game patches. Is the correct version of DirectX installed? Run dxdiag.exe for problems. Do you have enough room on the hard-drive? Is the sound enabled? Is it compatible?



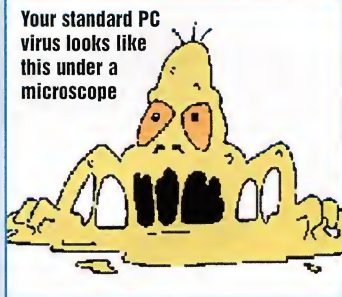
UPGRADE TIME

Q I have an Intel P4 @ 1.80GHz, a 64MB MX420, 256MB of RAM and a 120GB HDD with 94.9GB free. I would like to know what I would need to upgrade to play games that are coming out like Deus Ex 2, Half Life 2, War of the Ring and Doom 3. I'm only 14 so I don't have very good income (pocket money only) and I don't know what to spend my money on, either upgrades or games.

Alex White

A You should aim to save for a video card that is DirectX 9 capable; unfortunately, you'll have to change motherboards as well. The good news is that there are plenty of budget boards and cards that will fit the bill.

Your standard PC virus looks like this under a microscope



UH OH, VIRUS ALERT

Q Every 15 seconds this bloody window pops up and says "Files that are required for Windows to run properly have been replaced by unrecognized versions. To maintain system stability, Windows must restore the original versions of these files. Insert your Windows XP Professional CD-ROM now". After inserting my WinXP CD I did what was required and reset my computer and 15 seconds after logging in up comes this freaking window again. Now I just drag the window into the bottom corner of the screen so I can't see it. It's killing my games!

Matthew Gregor

A This is typical of a file-infecting virus like Parite. Given time, every executable on your system will be infected. Go and get yourself an antivirus program and see what can be salvaged of your system.

DOLBY DILEMMA

Q Sound is as important to me as food (very). So I decided to bump up performance in this area some months ago with a SB AudigySE 5.1 accompanied by a set of Cambridge Desktop Theatre 5.1 with the little external decoder which is Dolby Digital compatible. This was mainly because I just bought a DVD-ROM and wanted surround sound. On the back of this decoder is the coaxial AC-3 input plug but there isn't one on the back of the sound card, only the IEEE, black, green, pink, blue and orange (digital output) 3.5mm jacks. Is there a way to use

the AC3 plug on the speakers with the card's digital output or do I have to buy a separate AC3 encoder card?

>Kris

A The centre/subwoofer output jack (opposite end to the FireWire socket) can be switched to digital mode, giving the Audigy the ability to transmit multi-channel audio over a single cable. Mini-jack digital-out, is a real thing, but I swore black and blue at Creative for lack of a coaxial cable digital-out (RCA-type sockets). Even coaxial-out to DIN-in, like some other Cambridge models (FPS2000, DTT2500 and DTT3500) is preferable. You will need a 3.5mm digital-out to coaxial-in; and you will need to hunt around the top-end of town Hi-Fi stores to find this cable. Good luck!

GOODBYE MX440

Q I have a Gigabyte GA-8ST667 mobo (I know I know) running a P4 2.4 and 256MB DDR. It's only a 4X AGP and a SiS 645DX chipset to boot, so it's not the beast by any means, I'm running an MX440 card but wish to upgrade. I've read all your SetUps for the last six months (more like ten or so) and have found that you think I should burn in hell, for having this board, no just kidding. Without upgrading, what vid card can I use on this mobo? When I go to the Gigabyte site all it will tell me is that info about my mobo "is coming soon" so it's no help at all. Any info would be great as I need to give my mum something to buy me for Xmas.

Clayton Everett

A Your motherboard is AGP 2.0 compliant, so you can buy a new card, even 3.0 compliant, as long as it's backwards compatible with your board. AGP 2.0 added Fast Writes and introduced Quad Data Rate (QDR) AGP 4X to double the bandwidth to 1056MB/sec which was made possible by reducing the voltage swing from 3.3 to 1.5V. AGP 3.0 further reduces the signalling voltage to 0.8V to enable Octal Data Rate for AGP 8X; the connector is maintained at 1.5V keyed (universal). Since AGP 3.0 uses the same 1.5V keyed connector as AGP 4X, AGP 3.0 motherboards and graphic cards are generally designed to be compatible with existing implementations of AGP at 1.5V signalling (read: AGP 2.0). But, to avoid any potential problems, ask Mum for something like a Radeon 9600 Pro, or even a Ti is better than an MX.

WHICH CARD FOR HALF LIFE 2?



Q I've narrowed my video card upgrade down to a Radeon and I'm looking at spending up to about \$350. This puts me in the range of a 256MB 9600XT and a 128MB 9800SE. I don't upgrade often so I'm looking at something that will get me by for a few years. Being able to play Half Life 2 is a priority. What's going to give me the best bang for my buck right now? Also, I hear that 256MB of RAM is useless on a video card unless the card is a 9800 PRO+. Is this true?

Max

A To answer your last question first, the game developers are flinging polygons around like confetti at a celebrity wedding. Huge amounts of geometry are required for emerging 3D, DX9 games and 256MB isn't as silly as it sounds anymore; by Christmas, we'll wonder how 128MB ever cut the mustard. At razorprices.com/I found a 256MB Gigacube 9600XT for \$265 from Zone Computing and \$455 from Scorptec. Umart had a 128MB Sapphire 9800SE for \$356. Ha! Choices choices, I like the sound of an XT!

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To 1887578

To start a 1-2-1 text chat

Text costs \$3.95 per msg snd/rec



The Hub

WAR ON TEXTURES

Devoted Deus Ex fans have begun modding Invisible War to fix what they perceive to be some less than acceptable lo-res textures. Check out the forums at www.ionstorm.com for more info and download links.

MOD TO THE MAX

Rockstar and Remedy have announced a mod competition for Max Payne 2. The categories are Best Original Mod, Best Dead Man Walking Level and Best Machinima. Entries close May 14. Check www.rockstargames.com for more details.

Make Something Unreal Winners

All in one convenient list

Late December saw Epic disclose the winners of the first round of their massive Make Something Unreal competition.

So far the lucky winners are:

BEST MOD: Deathball v1.8 – essentially a modification of Blitzball but faster paced and with a far more sports like feel.

BEST LEVEL: DM 1v1 AugustMoon – a tight and brilliantly balanced 1v1 map complete with new music and models.

BEST LEVEL USING ORIGINAL CONTENT: DM Aristocracy – a medieval themed map for 4-8 players.

BEST MUTATOR: a tie between ChaosUT2: Evolution and TTM 2003 – ChaosUT2 combines an entirely new weapons pack as well as custom animations, levels and a duel

game mode whilst TTM 2003 is a tournament mod that allows admins to easily maintain servers as well as keep track of wins.

BEST MODEL: Effigy – a truly stunning little freak riding a bigger freak.

BEST VOICE PACK OR AUDIO MODIFICATION: UGrrl2003 – a new voice pack offering alternative voices for the female characters.

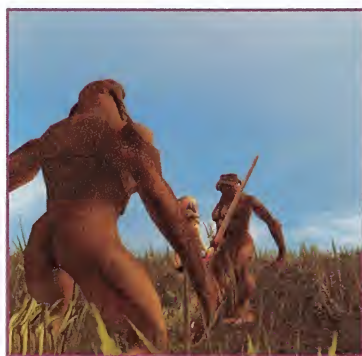
BEST TOOL: WOTgreal – a fully featured editing tool for the Unreal Engine.

BEST GAME TYPE: Riftwar – a character class based mod with three distinct teams, the humans, aliens and undead.



A Bit of Torment

MMO promises the world



It wasn't too long ago that MMOs would try to distinguish themselves by including a novel or expanded feature – a dynamic trade system, player built cities, player accountability, a skill based system as opposed to class based, large scale PvP wars or a player driven economy based on crafting. Realms of Torment, from Limitless Horizons will feature them all. Into the pot go bloodlines, meaning that any character created by a player will have certain traits in common, and degrading skills where any skill not frequently used will become rusty

after a while and will require some practice and study to maintain its level. Not setting the bar low, Limitless Horizons aims to have a little something for everyone as far as game mechanics go, but in what is becoming a rather disturbing trend at the current moment aren't really saying what the game is actually about. Instead the reticent developer has announced that the story will come out as players make their way through the game and they can have a vast impact on the game world through their actions, whatever that means.

Make a Wish

By now we should all be familiar with the concept of Massively Multiplayer Online Roleplaying Games – huge games with persistent worlds that allow hundreds (or thousands) of players to interact on a shared server, teaming up to vanquish the forces of evil. New MMORPG developer Mutable Realms seeks to go that one extra step further with their upcoming game Wish, a project they define as Ultra Massive Online Gaming. Instead of confining characters to certain servers and thereby limiting lag, Wish will

use a massively scalable system (Ice) that should allow tens of thousands of people to populate the same server thus doing away with the need for artificial zones on the server. Aside from the fact that the server clusters will be able to support a huge number of characters, the developer has neglected to offer much more information except the fact that it's going to have some very steep system requirements. The minimum specs put forward at this time are a P4 2.4GHz, 512MB RAM, and Radeon 9700.



Random Rings

RTS in multiplayer tourney shock



War of the Ring, the first RTS to take place in Tolkien's fabled fantasy world, may not exactly be taking the genre by storm due to its

generic feel and lack of truly faithful gameplay but nonetheless it's sure to gain a following amongst the gaming community on the strength of the

license alone. Counting on this following and maybe hoping to drum up some more interest, Vivendi Universal Games, in conjunction with a handful of websites, is sponsoring a worldwide competition. Unfortunately entries will have closed by the time you get to read this. What is the point of bringing the competition to public notice then? Well Vivendi has taken a somewhat unique approach to this competition in the fact that the finalists and eventual winner could be an equal matter of luck and skill. Out of all the entrants only 32 will be chosen at random to compete in the competition so the skill levels of the finalists could quite possibly be hugely mismatched. There doesn't seem to be any outcry against the approach at this very moment but don't be too surprised if some loser in the competition begins to cry foul because they had to play someone of a far greater skill level than them.

TURBINE TAKEOVER

Asheron's Call developer Turbine Entertainment has purchased the rights to its MMORPG from the game's original publisher Microsoft. The take-over will happen over the coming twelve months, with all aspects of the game and its support heading back into Turbine's hands.

BLIZZARD WANTS YOU

World of Warcraft is entering its initial beta testing phase with Blizzard calling for prospective testers to sign up as of late January. At this stage, the massively multiplayer RPG is scheduled for a June release State-side but has no confirmed ship date down under.

500K FF-ERS!

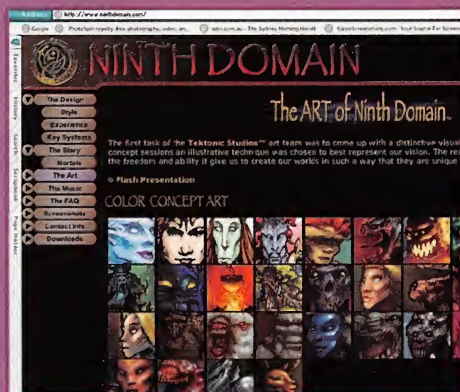
Congratulations are in order for Square-Enix and PlayOnline with the announcement that half a million gamers have subscribed to the Final Fantasy XI online experience. The first cross-platform MMORPG, FFXI isn't yet on sale in Australia, but we'll let you know as soon as we hear anything.

Here's MUD in your eye

Adventures in text

Many people (including the friendly staff here at PCPP) assumed that the rise of the MMORPG would herald the death of its venerable ancestor, the text based MUD (Multi User Domain/Dungeon). How wrong we were. MUDs are still alive and kicking if the success of GemStone IV (www.play.net/gs4/new.asp) is anything to go by. According to the site there are currently around 1 million active accounts on the servers. Even considering that as many as half of these accounts may simply be taking advantage of the 30 day free trial offer, that still leaves the game with far more subscribers

than most MMORPGs. Although the site jokes about the game being rendered on the most powerful graphics card available, your imagination, there is a great deal of truth to this statement. The greatest strength of the MUD over the MMORPG is the malleability and dynamic nature of the game world. Whilst it could conceivably take hundreds of man hours to add some new content to an MMO, adding new content to a MUD is a simple matter of typing it in and doing a small amount of coding. What would normally take weeks (if not months) can be achieved in hours.



Ninth Domain

If there's a better tagline for an MMO than, "The final battle between good and evil has been fought... Nobody won", then we are yet to see it. Ninth Gate from Tekonic Studios is set 1000 years after a devastating war between rival gods that nearly destroyed their planet. Seeing the destruction they had wrought, the gods wisely decided to step back and allow the various races to make their own way in the world unhindered. Although still worshipped by the masses the gods now mete out wisdom and advice rather than justice

and inevitable retribution. Aside from the standard Human race, Ninth Domain features a number of interesting races for the player to choose from, including the Palandri - willowy antlered folk, Amarthae - humanoids made of liquid metal who don't like to physically interact with anything as it may soil the spiritual purity of their bodies, the Mashai - small catlike humanoids with vestigial wings and strength disproportionate to their size and the Cainen - a race of tunnel dwelling, terrifyingly beautiful snake hybrids.

NFS: Underground

Proving multiplayer racing games have a long way to go



Here's the skinny: you're out on the street in your hot ride. A bunch of lamers have challenged you to a drag. You feel confident as you roll to the start line. The flags fall and you're off with a perfect shift. Then another perfect shift, all the way to 6th. You hit your nitro at the perfect moment and streak across the finish line... only to find that your opponents are already there. Huh?

Welcome to the wonderful world of Need For Speed Underground Multiplayer, a world where people can win races even while the delayed ghost of their car languishes behind you. A world of gnashing your hair and tearing your teeth. A world dominated by one thing: lag. Imagine, you're closing on the race leader, so you pull around his car and streak past... except his car suddenly appears in front of you and you both crash out... except that his car was actually a lag ghost and he was half a block ahead of you, completely unaware that he just put you off the road.

Like most PC multiplayer games, one person hosts the race and others join your game. There's a reputation points system, which is quite cool when it works, since you can see at a glance how hardcore your potential opponent is. Unfortunately, again, unstable servers mean hosted games often crash before you can even get racing. This wouldn't be so bad, except that EA counts this as a disconnect and penalises you 100 reputation points each time it happens. The company admits the game needs patching but apart from that seems strangely unapologetic of this state of affairs.

Anthony Fordham

RATING



FOR

Reputation system

AGAINST

Lag
Erratic scoring
More lag

OVERALL

On paper, the game works. In practice, it's a nightmare of lag.

63

Developer: EA ■ Publisher: EA ■ Distributor: EA ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Price: \$79.95 ■ Available: Now

XIII Online

Single player = XIII, Multiplayer = 2



Once again the spectre of early code rears its head. When we first looked at XIII the only option for us to test multiplayer was with a bot-match, an event which proved to be great arcade style fun. In hindsight some of the fun may have been due to the novelty of the look of the game and the satisfaction derived from killing an enemy and being rewarded by a gory headshot panel, a gaudy KABOOM or someone running around in beautifully cel-shaded flames. XIII as a game has a fairly simple combat mechanic, relying more on constant action and enemies rather than subtlety. Multiplayer is much the same.

Unfortunately many of the maps in each of the six multiplayer modes – deathmatch, team deathmatch, capture the flag, hunt, powerup and the Counter-Strike-esque sabotage – are so liberally peppered with weapons, armour and health that even the fast paced combat of the solo game becomes something of a chore. There is a fine line between a game being pleasantly arcadey and being plain overkill – unfortunately multiplayer XIII spends far too much of its time on the wrong side.

Also unfortunate is the small size of the multiplayer game. Anything under 32 players on a PC nowadays is really incomprehensible. The fact that XIII only supports 6 players is absolutely unforgivable. On the upside Powerup is a great deal of fun with a few friends – the anonymity of the powerups always leaves that certain level of chance in the games that really spice things up.

Daniel Wilks

RATING



FOR

Still looks great
Fast-paced

AGAINST

Too fast
Six players?!

OVERALL

We loved the solo game but now that the warm glow of that experience has faded the harsh reality of the multiplayer has sunk in.

60

Developer: Ubi Soft ■ Publisher: SUBI Soft ■ Distributor: Ubi Soft ■ Rating: M 15+ ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Available: Now

Call of Duty

Answer the call while online



Developer: Infinity Ward ■ Publisher: Activision ■ Distributor: Activision ■ Rating: MA 15+ ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Available: Now

P CPP is the first to admit that we are absolutely enamoured with Call of Duty. Unfortunately at the time of the review there were no servers available to test multiplayer – a deficit we are making up for now. Call of Duty multiplayer will feel very familiar to anyone who has played Medal of Honor multiplayer or even Counter-Strike due to the fast paced, objective oriented nature of the action. Aside from standard deathmatch and team deathmatch, Call of Duty also includes three other multiplayer styles; Retrieval, Behind Enemy lines and Search and Destroy.

Of these three modes, Behind Enemy Lines is the most enjoyable as it manages to walk that fine line between realism and arcade style shooting whilst still remaining incredibly action packed and tense.

Another fun new addition is the "Killcam". If you're one of those players who hates not knowing who shot you then it's definitely for you. After every death the player is given a brief enemy eye view of your last few seconds of life.

The modified Quake 3 engine and net code are very evident in the multiplayer game with most of the eleven maps (each of them a variation of one of the single player maps) running smoothly with a full player count. The only time you will run into trouble will be when there are more than about 20 players on screen at once. This is crippling for 56k and can really slow down a broadband connection as well. Unfortunately the lack of bot support means that you have to go online (or on LAN) to get your fix.

Daniel Wilks

RATING



FOR

Behind Enemy Lines
Killcam
Excellent weapons

AGAINST

No vehicles
Not enough maps

OVERALL

Although the single player game out does every other WWII shooter in a big way, Call of Duty multiplayer is a little too MoH: AA for our tastes.

80

Lords of EverQuest

Lord it up with your mates



With Lords of EQ it all comes back to the lords and the levelling. Since every unit has character levels and gains experience, and since any new troops come in at half the level of your lord, multiplayer revolves around keeping your lord in the thick of things without getting him or her killed.

This plus the slow build times create an interesting dynamic, which usually sees base attacks that come late and fencing over the limited platinum mines and assassination attempts on unwary lords. Sure, you get all of this in most RTS games, but it seems exaggerated in Lords of EQ.

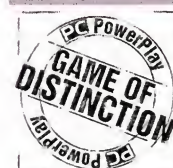
Quick games are the exception not the rule, which means you generally have some time to get your dodgy tactics in motion. Something that makes this more fun is the way that each unit has enough stats and different resistances that you can plan several counter strategies. The guys at Rapid Eye have done a fine job of balancing but I'm expecting the Dawn Brotherhood to cop a nerfing, just because they seem to be the easiest to get going and roll someone with.

The biggest problem you face with Lords of EQ is finding enough people to play. When I hit the dedicated Sony servers there were only a few games available at most. Technology-wise the matching is straight forward and the lag isn't too dire – I managed some very decent games on a 56K.

Overall, it might not crush all competition but the lord dynamic is a little fresh and this game is definitely more fun with other people (if you can find them).

Timothy C. Best

RATING



FOR

Slow games
Well balanced
Genuine strategy

AGAINST

Slow games
The Dawn Brotherhood
Few other players

OVERALL

Lords a levelling is something new

76

Developer: Rapid Eye ■ Publisher: Sony Online Entertainment ■ Distributor: Ubi Soft ■ Rating: G8+ ■ Price: \$89.95 ■ Available: Now

Checkmate Beta 3

For: UT 2003 ■ Version: Beta 3 ■ URL: www.unnaturalgaming.com/checkmate ■ Size: 12.4Mb ■ Score: 5/5



The problem with reviewing mods is that the vast majority of them are for all intents and purposes identical, simple transposing the same idea (realistic combat, gritty urban combat, cartoon violence) to a different engine. Luckily every now and then a mod is released that breaks the mold and delivers something new and interesting. Checkmate Beta 3 is essentially a UT 2003 Kill the King style mod. Every round one of the players from each team is spawned as the King, a tough and fast moving unit equipped with a powerful gauntlet attack. The other members of the team are initially spawned as Pawns, weak basic units with the special ability to self

destruct and kill nearby units. The round is over when one of the Kings is dead. After the initial round, players can purchase more powerful Chess based units with points accumulated through frags in the previous round. Knights are equipped with a grenade launcher and can triple-jump, Bishops are fast moving snipers with the ability to cloak for short periods of time, Rooks are slow moving and powerful and can teleport directly to the King to protect him and Queens are fast, well equipped and have access to a grapple. The idea is simple but the execution makes it great.



Hostile Intent v1

For: Half-Life ■ Version: 1 ■ URL: planethalflife.com/hostileintent/index.asp ■ Size: 101.2Mb ■ Score: 3/5



Speaking of mods that all seem to follow the same through line, Hostile Intent is a new Half-Life mod that aims to bring the world of gritty urban terrorist/counter terrorist combat to life with only partially successful results. If you're looking for a fast paced alternative to Counter-Strike then look elsewhere – Hostile Intent is a deliberately slow and tactically based game. To facilitate this realism the developers have done away with any type of crosshair, instead necessitating that the player use the weapon sights to aim or even shoot. No spraying from the hip in this one. Aiming down the sights occludes a good portion of the screen and slows the player down so finding a good and protected spot is all but necessary before opening fire. The developers are also working on trying to make jumping impossible when firing, an act that will infuriate all those bunny-hopping motherf****s out there but make the rest of us breathe easier. At the current stage of development Hostile Intent only carries nine maps, each of which has its own set of triggered event based object

Experience WWII

For: Battlefield 1942 + Road to Rome ■ Version: 2.4 beta ■ URL: www.experienceww2.com ■ Size: 171.6 Mb ■ Score: 4/5



More realism mods but this time in the guise of Battlefield 1942. Experience WWII adds the elements of realism through a few subtle physics and damage tweaks as well as skins, more realistic vehicles, weapons and the like. Although half of the fun of BF1942 is the ability to do stupid crap such as wing walking, kamikaze runs into enemy tanks, tank jumps and the like, the slightly slower and far more deadly nature of Experience is quite fun as well. Aside from the obvious cosmetic, sound and map differences it's hard to point out the actual changes between Experience and normal Battlefield as the tweaks are subtle but the overall feel is different and strong enough to make it a worthwhile game in its own right. By and large the new skins and animations look great but the occasional glitch or interesting quirk shows that there's still a way to go before the game gets a final release. All of the reskinned/modified vehicles and weapons are based off extensive historical research and images so WWII history buffs should get a blast out of driving around in a realistically soft Sherman tank or frighteningly powerful Tiger.



Multi Theft Auto: Vice City

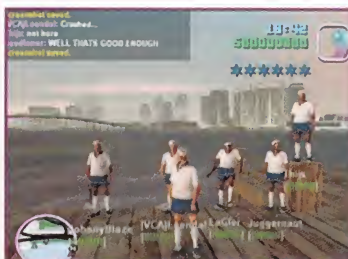


For: GTA: Vice City ■ Version: v0.3r2 ■ URL: www.mtavc.com ■ Size: 1Mb ■ Score: 3/5



When GTA3 and Vice City were finally released for PC there was anguish that the game didn't ship with multiplayer. Never was it considered that the game may not be suitable for multiplayer. Be that as it may, a year later comes a new version of Multi Theft Auto, one of the few multiplayer

mods for the game. While the amount of work the coders have had to go through to create the network code and clear up some of the animation bugs in the standard game you can't really help but wonder as to the point of the exercise. The experience is somewhat akin to simply playing solo with a couple of aggressive drivers and a box filled with the typical style of online gaming smack talk and crap. The interaction between players is basically limited to killing each other or watching them do stunts. Although watching people do stunts can be a lot of fun you can achieve the same results by downloading the footage or simply looking over a friend's shoulder while they play.



Frag Ops



For: UT 2003 ■ Version: v1.3 ■ URL: www.frag-ops.com ■ Size: 223.1Mb ■ Score: 4/5

Not all real world style combat has to be realistic as shown in Frag Ops 1.3. Whilst some other terrorist/counter terrorist style mods strive to be gritty and realistic, Frag Ops instead moves in the other direction becoming more stylistic and action packed, playing more like a digital B-grade action film than a brutal thriller. Obviously influenced by other mods such as Action Half-Life, Frag Ops is all about the action, tactics and subtlety be damned. Players start a round in the now familiar fashion of buying weapons and armour with their earnings and then pits the two teams (Spec Ops and Mercenaries) against each

other over 11 maps, each with their own specific objectives. The map design ranges from fairly straightforward to very good and the weapons are well balanced. Fans of two-gun-mojo will be pleased to hear that Frag Ops supports dual wield so you can gad about the levels with a submachine gun in either fist pumping out a virtual hailstorm or high velocity lead. The character and weapon skins are excellent but one of the real highlights of the game are the new animations and effects such as regaining footing after jumping, smoking muzzles and some excellent breaking glass.



Heat of Battle



For: Call of Duty ■ Version: v.2 beta ■ URL: www.fileplanet.com/files/130000/134888.shtml ■ Size: 7.4Mb ■ Score: 4/5



It's only fitting that in a month when we review the multiplayer element of Call of Duty that we also include one of the first Call of Duty mods. Heat of Battle introduces a Capture and Hold mode to the popular WWII shooter.

Aside from the new game mode, Heat of Battle also adds a few tweaks to the game engine to make everything a little more realistic including bleeding and bandaging, bullet penetration, slower player movement and no auto centering.

Some other tweaks have been added that make an already great game even cooler. Instead of simply lobbing grenades and watching things go boom, the explosives now have different effects depending on how close to the detonation the player is. New grenade effects include being knocked to the ground, shock, ringing ears and having your weapon knocked out of your hands.

In a truly heroic WWII movie style players can also throw themselves (go prone) on a grenade to save their companions as well as being picked up and thrown back. They can also now be thrown through glass and even do a little damage if they hit another player when thrown.

GARAGE GAMES

Into the unknown with George Soropos

COMBAT MISSION AFRIKA KORPS

Developer: Battlefront Genre: Strategy (turn based planning with realtime execution) URL: www.battlefront.com/index.htm



The boys from Battlefront.com are on the menu for this month's garage games, well one of them at least, and a look at their newest addition to the Combat Mission series: Afrika Korps. Battlefront.com began selling games to the public about four years ago after its' founding members Steve Grammont and Charles Moylan got together in 1998. Their first release was the now classic Combat Mission: Beyond Overlord which was successful enough to allow them to become full time game developers and take on some more staff members, with the team currently numbering six regulars.

Combat Mission: Afrika Korps is a slightly misleading title as the game actually encompasses the entire Mediterranean theatre including Italy, Sicily and Crete as well as North Africa. The game uses a more accurate LOS system than previous versions of the Combat Mission engine, and also incorporates more accurate armour penetration algorithms, dust and smoke effects (both graphical and as a combat modifier) and adjustable waypoints. But you can read all about that on their site. We had the opportunity to ask Martin Van Balkom (Battlefront's marketing guy and game manual author) a few questions about life, the universe and indie gaming:

ONE-ON-ONE WITH MARTIN VAN BALKOM

PCPP: Your games obviously take a lot from the older style WWII board games like the Avalon Hill series, do you guys come from a board gaming background?

MVB: Actually what eventually turned into Combat Mission started out as a computer version of one of Avalon Hill's best selling titles - Squad Leader. Charley Moylan, our lead programmer, has worked for Avalon Hill and made a number of computer versions of boardgames in the past - Achtung Spitfire! and Flight Commander for example. The Squad Leader project never was finished, and eventually evolved into Combat Mission.

PCPP: As an Australian mag our readers will be interested in knowing if you have included any Australian and New Zealand units amongst the allied forces in the game? New Zealanders apparently came in handy as human speed humps for Panzer IIIs.

MVB: Yep, Australian and New Zealand formations are included, from the various infantry formations that saw combat in the Med theatre, to a number of tanks, vehicles and other equipment. Most of the main historical choices for weapons, formations and equipments are included in the game, and all units come localised with the appropriate camo paint schemes, even unit markings, uniforms and so on.

PCPP: Are there any plans to cover the pacific theatre of WWII in any upcoming titles? Perhaps with a what-if Japanese invasion of Australia included?



Demo: http://www.battlefront.com/products/cmak/cmak_demo.html

MVB: All of our titles come with full featured map and scenario editors, so if we'd ever visit the Pacific, then people could easily make such hypothetical scenarios, even if we wouldn't include any on the CD. There are thousands of scenarios available for the CM series (including some Pacific scenarios, a Desert Mod and so on). Now will we go to the Pacific? Well, maybe... :-)

PCPP: The turn based format of your games obviously gives the player time for some deep strategic thinking; however it can take a very long time to get through some of the bigger battles. Do you think it is possible to create a real-time strategy title with sufficient depth to keep hardcore players interested?

MVB: Sure it's possible; real-time strategy isn't anything bad all by itself. What the turn-based format allows us to do is to increase the scope of the game. In CM, one player alone can lead hundreds if

not thousands of units in a realistic military simulation. This would be totally impossible in a real-time environment without massive abstractions and simplifications. There is a limit to what a player and what a computer can handle in real time, and we get around this problem with a hybrid turn-based/real-time approach.

PCPP: What practical advice would you give to anyone wanting to get into indie game development? :)

MVB: Hm, okay, I can give you what I think are three big points to keep in mind: first, think small. Most first time game developers bite off more than they can swallow, be it in pure technical terms or in expectations. Secondly, don't try to go from zero to a full-time game developer overnight. Keep your day job, and finish your first game without outside funding. Outside funding only increases the pressures and risk. Third, come to us :-). Battlefront.com is both a developer and publisher, and we do publish third-party games, help out with development if needed, and offer worldwide publishing and distribution services. "Strategic Command", available directly through www.battlefront.com or from our distribution partner Auran in Australia, has been a one-man project by Hubert Cater, who we helped from conception to distribution.



BOOTCAMP

Online Tips and Tactics

CALL OF DUTY

Last year's best shooter is also a gripping multiplayer experience. Daniel Wilks is your drill sergeant today...



Deathmatch

AVAILABLE MAPS:

Brecourt, Carentan, Chateau, Dawnville, Depot, Harbor, Hurtgen, Pavlov, POW Camp, Railyard, Rocket, Ship.

Deathmatch is ideally viewed as a training ground for the more interesting team based games. Use your experience to perfect your aim and knowledge of the maps. To this end the Killcam is both your best friend and your enemy. On the plus side you can use the Killcam to discover all of the hidden spots, vantage points and choke points used by more experienced players, quickly learning the ins and outs of the maps without having to labour over the details. On the negative side players can also do the same right back to you. Always remember to keep on the move – if you stay in the same place for too many kills you'll render that spot next to useless for the remainder of the game as the other players will know you favour it.

Team Deathmatch

AVAILABLE MAPS:

Brecourt, Carentan, Chateau, Dawnville, Depot, Harbor, Hurtgen, Pavlov, POW Camp, Railyard, Rocket, Ship.

The most important thing to take note of in Team Deathmatch (and any other team based game for that matter) is which uniform is which. It's easy to identify the enemy in a single player game but in the heat of multiplayer it's far too easy to see someone jump out of nowhere and blaze away in panic, killing both a valuable ally and any faith they may have in you as well. When in doubt for the first few game only shoot at



those shooting at you. Sure you'll die more often than not but it will get you used to who to shoot at. Also consider taking notice of which weapons your teammates are choosing on spawn. By choosing a different weapon to spawn with you can increase your firepower by picking up one of your fallen comrades weapons.

Retrieval

AVAILABLE MAPS:

Brecourt, Carentan, Chateau, Dawnville, Depot, Harbor, Hurtgen, Pavlov, POW Camp, Railyard, Rocket, Ship.

It's often a good tactic to tackle the more difficult objective first and save the closer objective until last. Doing so can severely hamper the flow of the defender's plan and make then endgame a breeze. Whatever you do, make sure to do it as a team – massed troops make all forms of combat easier and minimise your chances of dying. Of course there are



always useful tactics to carry out solo. Individual players can stage hit and run raids on the secondary objective (preferably using grenades or other explosive weapons) to cause as much chaos as they can and thereby splitting the enemy forces, making the rest of the team's job easier. When defending it's always important to have a few advance scouts to give warning that the enemy is coming, giving you more time to organise a concerted defence.

Search & Destroy

AVAILABLE MAPS:

Brecourt, Carentan, Dawnville, Depot, Harbor, Hurtgen, Pavlov, POW Camp, Railyard, Rocket.

The most important thing to remember in Search and Destroy is that planting the explosives takes about six seconds in which the player is totally vulnerable to enemy fire. Defenders are all but a necessity if you want to get the bomb successfully planted. Instead of watching the event take place, defenders can simply cover different directions – any decent sound setup will make it easy to hear the bomb being set. When attacking the objectives a strategy of divide and conquer is optimal. Sending a team at each of the objectives will split the defender's forces. Even if you don't have the bomb (the actual target for

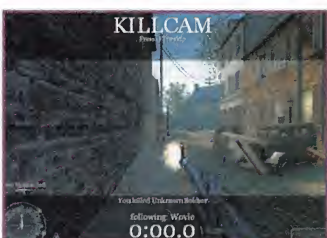
demolition being the other objective), crouching in front of the bomb spot is a great way to call the heat away from the rest of the team. Sure you'll probably die but you'll ultimately get the win.

Behind Enemy Lines

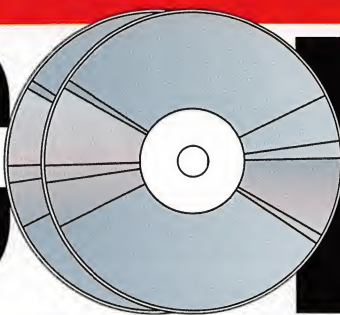
AVAILABLE MAPS:

Brecourt, Carentan, Chateau, Dawnville, Depot, Harbor, Hurtgen, Pavlov, POW Camp, Railyard, Rocket, Ship.

The most important thing to remember if you're playing one of the allies is to keep moving. Staying in one place is simply inviting enemy players to home in on you. Although the compass will point in your general direction when you're moving it is far more accurate when you stand still. Automatic weapons give Allied players a better chance of surviving as you have far more than enough targets to warrant three round bursts. Try to keep away from open spaces – Allied players need somewhere to hide, preferably with a roof and good viewing angles as these areas serve as good choke points and often give you a chance to regenerate some health. When hunting Allied players the compass is your friend. Keep an eye on it and pounce as soon as you see one of the players stop moving.



THE DISC



REQUESTS

We welcome requests so please forward your requests to Disc Producer Amos Hong via email at cdgod@next.com.au or write to PCPP DVD Requests, 78 Renwick St, Redfern NSW 2016



Finally, the Steam Cache with all the updates for Half Life has made it to the DVD disc. Hooray!!! There are also some killer mods, movies and demos for all you guys to try.

This month in Spotlight is one of the most requested files. Yes, it is the whopping 723MB file that contains all of the Steam cache updates needed for Half-Life, Counter-Strike, Day of Defeat, Opposing Force, DMC, TFC, and Ricochet. Now everyone can run Half-Life v1.1.2.0 and Counter-Strike v1.6 in the Steam client. There are also some fantastic movies like the BloodRayne 2 trailer and the Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow rolling demo. The Demo section includes some fun games that should keep you occupied till next month. Now everyone can try the high speed and often-brutal game of Quidditch in the Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup Demo. There are also some action packed demos like

Armed and Dangerous, Massive Assault and WWII: Pacific Warrior.

Mods Plus has an incredible 8 great mods for games such as Battlefield: 1942, Half Life, UT 2003 and Call of Duty. Check it out!! Also don't forget to grab the patch to update last month's Spotlight game America's Army 2.0 to version 2.0.0a. There are several other Patches that should fix some bugs in some of your favourite games. ROM has decided to do a special tribute section for Doom in the Bunker. There are some cool patches, mods and maps for the game. The Utilities page has the newest versions of the Catalyst Radeon Display Driver and Winamp.

Have a great month, and keep your noses clean.

Amos Hong
Disc Master
cdgod@next.com.au

DVD CONTENTS

SPOTLIGHT/ MOVIES

Steam Client with Full Steam Cache

TRAILERS

Anachronox - Part 12 of 13
BloodRayne 2
Bouncer Please
Common Sense Cooking
Far Cry Physics Video
Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault
The Punisher
Spellforce
Spider-Man 2
Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow



OFFICIAL PC POWERPLAY WALLPAPER

Richard Honey

DEMOS

Against Rome
Armed and Dangerous
Downfall
Pax Solaris
Wars and Warriors: Joan of Arc
Massive Assault
WWII: Pacific Warrior
Alien Sky
Postal 2: Share the Pain
Harry Potter: Quidditch World Cup
School Tycoon
Spellforce: The Order of Dawn

MODS PLUS

Experience WWII v2.4 Beta [BF:1942]
FragOps v1.3 Alpha [UT2003]
Heat of Battle Beta v.2 [CoD]
Home Front Beta v.1 0 [BF:1942]
Hostile Intent v1 [HL]
MTA:VC 0.3r2 [GTA:VC]
Sven Co-op v3.0 [HL]

PLUS MODLIFE

Checkmate Beta 3 [UT2003]



PATCHES

America's Army: Special Forces v2.0 - 2.0.0a
Deus Ex: Invisible War v1.1
Halo v1.0 - 1.031
Homeworld 2 v1.1
Lock On: Modern Air Combat v1.01 Patch [US]
Massive Assault UK Retail Patch

v1.0.190

Raven Shield Stand Alone Server
v1.4 - v1.41
Spellforce: The Order of Dawn v1.03
Warcraft III v1.14 Patch
WCIII: The Frozen Throne v1.14 Patch



ROM'S BUNKER

Heaps more wallpaper, free games, Winamp skins, map packs and addon files for all your favourite games. Come get some!

UTILITIES

Adobe Acrobat Reader 6.0 - f
Advanced Zip Repair 1.6 - s
AutoDivx Player 3.6 - f
Catalyst Radeon Display Driver 3.10 7.96 - f
DivX Player (with DivX Codec) 5.1.1 - f
DirectX 9.0b - f
GameSpy Arcade v1.4 - f
Windows Media Player 9 - f
Winamp 5.01 - f
WinRAR 3.2 - s
Winzip 8.1 - s
Zip Repair 1.0 - f

CD CONTENTS

CD 1

DEMOS

Beyond Good and Evil
Broken Sword: The Sleeping Dragon
Deus Ex 2: Invisible War



FREE GAMES

2004 Backgammon
Creative Racing 1.0
Silver Knights
Sharpshooter's Miniature Golf
Guakamole Con Sushi

PATCHES

America's Army: Special Forces v2.0 - 2.0.0a
Massive Assault UK Retail Patch v1.0.190

CD 2

DEMOS

Contract J.A.C.K.
Lock On: Modern Air Combat
Max Payne 2
Unreal II XMP

NEXT MONTH



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Kidz 4 Petz 2004

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The boots and I love pet games. We love Virtua Dog, Virtua Cat, Virtua Ferret and even the rare and buggy Virtua Silkworm Shoebox. We love games where you get an electronic pet and have to take care of it. We love to love, love to cry, love to laugh at its tiny, digitally pre-rendered antics. The boots and I own, between the three of us, no fewer than sixteen classic-era Tamagotchis, some of which are still on their first lives. These things are ten years old or more, and if one of them were to die... well, there'd be a day of mourning, that's for sure.

In fact, it's this potentially interesting interaction of human and dead pet that has lead startup developer Say It Don't Spay It (SIDS) to begin development on Kidz 4 Petz 2004. Lead developer Shandy McRandy explains the concept to me over a quiet drink in a pub my crazy ex-third flatmate doesn't know exists.

"Sure, keeping virtual pets is as old as that Tamagotchi you've got hanging from your keyring," says McRandy, "but what about the interaction between the parent and the child who has just demanded the latest fad pet? Now that's an interesting concept."

My Tamagotchi beeps for attention, so I spend a few moments feeding it, petting it and cleaning up tiny pixels of poop. Then I turn my attention back to McRandy.

"Sorry I wasn't listening," I say, so he repeats the comment. I nod sagely and ask him to elaborate.

"Sure," he says, "so in the game you play the part of the parent and you get to choose from a range of different cute little kids, aged from about five to thirteen, who will be your child. We've left most of the kid raising stuff - feeding, washing, applying administrative punishment - for other games, while we concentrate on the kid's pet. Early in the game you'll get to choose a pet for your kid, or you can attempt to artificially boost the love meter by paradoxically denying the kid a pet for just long enough so they hate you enough to suddenly love you to bits when you finally do relent and go get a puppy." I pause for a minute or two while working this one out in my head. Finally, I think I have it. I ask McRandy to go on.

"Sure," he says, "so you go out and get this pet and after a while, usually a short while although it depends on the kid you've selected, the kid will get bored of the pet and will refuse to feed it or look after it in any way and you can choose to either take on the responsibility of looking after the pet yourself or you can take it outside and drown the little bastard in this really nice 3D pond we've put together. You should see the water reflections."



"Sure," says SIDS lead artist Randy McShandy, who is sitting at my other elbow nursing a rum and coke, "I've spent six months getting the reflections just right as well as the ripples that spread out from the desperately kicking hind legs of whatever it is you're murdering."

"Sure," McRandy interrupts, "some people say gameplay is more important than graphics, so we're not skimping on the gameplay. It's all about choice. You don't HAVE to kill the pet the child has lost interest in - you can simply dump it on the side of the road. In a box, or a bag, or just by itself. Or you can fling it off a bridge. Or take it to the pound, although this last one is a difficult way to play because if you keep bringing pets to the pound they eventually call the RSPCA on you and you won't be allowed to get any more pets and the kid will hate you and the love meter will drop to zero and you'll lose the game."

"Sure," I say, despite myself.

"Sure," agrees McShandy, "although I'm very proud of the texture work associated with the different pets, especially in the pound module. Cat litter is hard. But the game's not just about pets you can take to the pound, you can get fish too."

"Sure!" cries McRandy, perking up, "This is the best bit, the fish. See, you can artificially boost the love meter by getting the kid like a TV or some DVDs or something to distract them, but they will be exposed to media and will thus find out about even more exotic types of pets like Iguanas or, thanks to that movie Finding Nemo, clownfish."

"You got the license for Finding Nemo?" I ask, genuinely surprised.

"Sure," says McRandy, "we wanted too. But Disney wanted like, nine bazillion dollars or something, so we call the fish movie 'Finding Nimu'. It's kind of the same thing but we hope the name change will avoid any legal trouble. Anyway, so you can get the kid an Iguana or some clownfish and these can really boost the love meter but they totally cost heaps of money so if your kid gets a taste for exotic pets it can ruin you pretty quickly."

I wonder about the discarded pets, if the player can choose to look after them instead of having them killed.

"Sure," says McRandy, "we have a really big laundry in the virtual house and a back shed and you can just pile more and more animals into both these locations until they start dropping off by themselves, and then you can stock the bodies in the industrial sized freezer in the garage, and then the pets will start to breed and you'll get bigger and bigger populations and you can actually win a bonus mode of the game where the cops come around and take the kid off you and all the half-starved dogs and cats and ferrets out of the garage and you get written up on Rotten.com as a crazy cat lady."

"Sure, or man," adds McShandy.

"Sounds cool," I admit, "so good luck with it. Hey by the way, it's a funny co-incidence about your names isn't it?"

"Sure," says McRandy, "what the hell are you talking about?"

Incidentally, if you're ever at this pub that I can't name because I don't want my crazy ex-third flatmate to know where it is so I can get a quiet drink at least one night a week... uh... never mind.

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